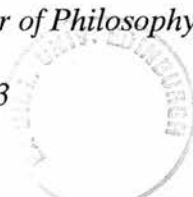


# **Cannabis and young people's lives: exploring meaning and social context**

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## ABSTRACT

Since the early 90s there has been no decline in regular smoking rates among 12-15 year olds in Scotland and a considerable increase in cannabis use among teenagers. This thesis aims to explore the role of cannabis in young people's lives during their early teenage years. By generating contextual data on the social situations within which young people use cannabis and the meanings they attach to this behaviour, this study aims to illuminate how participants' cannabis related beliefs, attitudes and behaviour fit within the broader contexts of their everyday lives. This study also aims to explore the links between young people's cannabis and tobacco use, building in particular on findings from a number of earlier studies.

The study used qualitative methods, interviewing 59 young people, aged 13-15, primarily in self-selected friendship pairs within the informal setting of youth clubs. In using this relatively novel approach, the study also has a methodological focus, contributing to debates about researching young people's perspectives. The participants were drawn from different socio-economic backgrounds with a range of patterns of use/non-use of both cannabis and cigarettes. The interviewing and analysis of data were based upon a methodology which assumes that it is possible to learn about young people's social worlds through qualitative interviewing. Through these interviews, 'stories' were co-produced and then analysed inductively to generate theory grounded in the data.

In order to explore how cannabis fits within young people's lives, the data were analysed using a framework encompassing four main contexts - family, peers, local neighbourhood and aspects of broader culture. Analysis of the interview data revealed that young cannabis users employ a discourse of ambiguity when talking about parents' 'knowing' about their cannabis use. For some young people, particularly boys, cannabis appears to play a central role in street based leisure cultures, although this was more apparent in some local areas than in others. Within this context, cannabis was closely linked to aspects of social identity, in particular achieving peer status and recognition. Its use was also associated with demonstrating independence in a context of adult-free space. Placing the study in a broader cultural context, the current debate surrounding cannabis control was also found to be of considerable interest to many young people, cannabis users and non-users alike. For some 'cannabis-oriented' participants, their cannabis use also seemed to support and sustain their cigarette smoking behaviour, a finding that has implications for the development of effective smoking cessation programmes. A methodological analysis suggested that using friendship pairs is a promising approach to researching young people's perspectives. This method enables young people to express themselves and demonstrate their knowledge and reasoning in reflective and sophisticated ways, providing occasional glimpses into more private worlds as well as presenting well-rehearsed public accounts, especially about health promotion messages. In particular, interviewing young people in self-selected friendship pairs allows access to interactions between participants, illuminating aspects of their social relationships with one another.

This thesis makes both a theoretical and a methodological contribution to our understanding of young people and their lives, particularly in relation to cannabis use, attitudes to cannabis and other health related behaviours. It highlights the significance for health promotion policy and practice of listening to young people's perspectives, in particular, their accounts of how these behaviours fit within the broader contexts of their lives.

*Number of words in main text of thesis: 83700*



## DECLARATION

In accordance with University regulations, I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification:

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*Gill Highet*  
*March 2003*

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## **CHAPTER 1:        INTRODUCTION**

### **Rationale and aims of study**

The idea for this study developed in response to research evidence showing that, since the early 90s, there has been no decline in regular smoking rates among 12-15 year olds in Scotland and a considerable increase in cannabis use among teenagers, with around 40% of Scottish 15 year olds reporting that they have used cannabis. In particular, recent qualitative research suggested that contrary to the prevailing view that tobacco introduces some young people to cannabis, today smoking cannabis may introduce some young people to tobacco, and subsequently to cigarette smoking (Albutt et al, 1995, Bell et al, 1998). Little research, however, has looked into the relationship between cannabis use and cigarette smoking or into cannabis use itself, particularly in the early teenage years. Three preliminary aims were formulated for the study:

1. To gain an understanding of the meanings and use of cigarettes and cannabis in young people's lives
2. To explore the inter-relationship between their experimentation and use
3. To identify the implications for health promotion

At an early stage, and for a number of reasons, the study shifted to a more particular emphasis on cannabis. The timing of the fieldwork phase coincided with a re-emergence of public and media interest in drugs reform. Cannabis deregulation in particular received a lot of attention and became a subject for debate in the new Scottish Parliament. This degree of exposure was clearly reflected in the way that participants talked about cannabis during the pilot and early fieldwork interviews. This experience seemed to suggest that cannabis in general, and arguments relating to its regulation, in particular, were salient issues for many people, with participants often introducing this topic themselves. Generating data on participants' perspectives on cigarette smoking, on the other hand, proved more difficult. In contrast, many participants seemed reluctant to discuss this at all, and those who did overwhelmingly talked about it as normal, routine and unremarkable. This seemed consistent with recent developments in the smoking literature which suggested that perhaps cigarette smoking may no longer occupy its former 'risk-taking' role in many young people's lives. Generating data on participants' perspectives on this aspect of young people's behaviour may therefore add little to the current evidence base which is already well developed. Methodological factors also seemed to rule out a detailed study of young people's perspectives on both behaviours. In practice, attempting to

elicit accounts about both behaviours was often confusing. The free-flowing, interactive nature of interviewing young people in small groups and friendship pairs meant that participants often moved between topics and this made it difficult to judge which behaviour they were talking about at any particular time. Having to continually ask whether participants were referring to tobacco or cannabis was tedious, and more importantly, often interrupted the flow of the interviews. Exploring participants' perspectives on cannabis in particular, on the other hand, seemed a much more fruitful and less ambiguous prospect. Participants found this an interesting and relevant topic, whether or not they were 'users', and these data seemed to offer the opportunity of shedding further light on a little understood aspect of young people's health related behaviour. Whilst not losing sight of the aim of finding out more about the relationship between cannabis and cigarettes, later interviews became more firmly oriented towards a detailed exploration of young people's cannabis use.

### **Health promotion informed by sociological perspectives - managing the tensions**

This study is rooted within the professional discipline of health promotion. While health promotion is in many respects a contested concept, an issue which is discussed at some length in the next chapter, this study takes the view that health promotion is a multi-disciplinary enterprise, drawing upon different forms of knowledge to create its own theoretical base (Bunton & McDonald, 1992). This study draws particularly on sociological perspectives, a useful tool for increasing the effectiveness of health promotion. Analyses of social structures and a consideration of the role of lay beliefs, for example, can shed light on how individual behaviour is constrained and influenced. Sociology is also a discipline based on critical analysis, and hence allows for questions to be asked about the goals and aims of health promotion and their potential consequences in a wider social context. In recent years, addressing young people's risk behaviours has become one of the key goals of health promotion. A whole raft of policy documents have made recommendations and set targets aimed at reducing young people's involvement in a range of such behaviours (SODH, 1999, 2000, SE, 2001). This policy imperative is informed by a belief that while for the most part, young people enjoy the lowest mortality and morbidity rates among the general population, many of the health behaviours evident in young people, while not having serious consequences at that stage, may be the precursors of patterns of illness in later life.

Alongside this, the policy agenda has also shifted towards a commitment to listening to young people's own views and perspectives, not just on health, but on a wide range of issues affecting their lives. Young people's active participation in policy and service development is now seen as a central plank of government policy, although achieving this in practice remains an elusive goal. This shift is consistent with recent changes in legislative frameworks, some on a global level, which have radically altered views on children and young people as citizens and social actors (United Nations, 1989, Children Act, 1989, Children (Scotland) Act, 1995 Human Rights Act, 1998). The rights of children to participate in society and to have their opinions taken into account on matters affecting their lives are now well established. So too are developments in sociology which have begun to transform the way in which children are viewed. Both children and young people are now much more likely to be regarded as active rather than passive agents, as 'beings' rather than 'becomings' (Qvortrup et al, 1994, Mayall, 1994, Alderson, 1995, James & Prout, 1997, James et al, 1998, Christensen & James, 2000). This new approach emphasises the importance of providing appropriate social frameworks within which all young people can develop.

One critique of how these developments may be influencing the practice of health promotion, however, argues that part of the rationale for this new interest in listening to young people's views may lie in a recognition that existing health education messages appear to have little impact on the actual behaviours of many young people (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). Nowhere is this more evident than in relation to young people's substance use. For example, there appears to be a hard core of young smokers resistant to every form of media campaign, while drug cultures remain impervious both to the 'just say no' approach and to the more liberal harm minimisation strategies (Plant & Plant, 1992, Hendry et al, 1993, Parker et al, 1998, Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998).

This is a tension which lies at the heart of any health promotion research that is informed predominantly by sociological perspectives - how to manage a context which both places young people's 'risk' behaviours at the top of the policy agenda but which also gives centre stage to young people's own perspectives on many of the issues affecting their lives. In the context of the present study, this tension derives from using a pre-set professional agenda aimed at exploring participants' cannabis use rather than starting from young people's own concerns and issues. This type of research, if driven by a simplistic view of youth and their risk taking as a social



problem, and conducted in an uncritical way, may constrain the terms of the debate in an unhelpful way. However, the present study has attempted to manage this tension in a number of ways. First of all, it has taken social context as its starting point, generating contextualised accounts of young people's cannabis use. This approach draws upon the broader framework of young people's lives and allows for an analysis of how aspects of culture, social structure and family and peer relationships intersect with agency to shape young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. The study also purposefully explored these issues from the perspectives of young people themselves, using self-selected friendship pairs, a method that proved to be both highly effective in generating such accounts, and the popular choice of interview method among young people themselves. In this way, the study tapped into the rich diversity of young people's experiences, shedding light on the meanings underpinning their cannabis use. Finally, the study was driven by a highly reflexive practice which involved challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and taking account of the researcher's own role as co-producer in the data generation process.

In summary, this study starts from the assumption that reducing young people's risk-taking, in particular their cannabis and tobacco use, is an important health promotion goal. However, it does not accept this unproblematically, nor does it see young people themselves as the problem. Rather, it seeks to more fully understand these behaviours by encouraging young people themselves to talk about their lives and in this way, involve them as equal partners in the health promotion enterprise. The remainder of this introductory chapter will describe briefly the young people who took part in the study, how they were recruited and how they were interviewed. More detailed profiles of the participants and the interview settings can be found in Appendices 1 & 2 and in the methodology chapter together with a critical discussion of key methodological issues. The chapter will conclude by describing the structure and content of the remainder of the thesis.

### **Study participants and settings**

As noted earlier, few studies have explored young people's cannabis use during their early teenage years. This study therefore targeted the 13-15 age range and a total of 59 young people took part, mostly recruited from youth club settings. The participants were drawn from seven different youth clubs in five different geographical locations. The youth clubs were selected to reflect an urban/semi-rural mix and included young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.



Participants were selected to ensure a range of patterns of use/non-use of both cannabis and cigarettes. A small number of participants were recruited through personal friendship networks at the pilot stage. These two interviews were conducted in participants' own homes and these data were also included in the analysis. Participants were given a choice of how they would like to be interviewed, most opting for self-selected friendship pairs over individual interviews. A total of 30 interviews were conducted over a twelve month period, the fieldwork phase ending in the summer of 2001.

### **Structure and content of thesis**

A comprehensive review of the literature is presented in Chapter 2. The chapter begins by discussing the perspectives which have informed the study itself and the choice of literatures to be covered in the review. This includes a critique of the contested nature of health promotion and the kind of research that is required to solve today's complex public health problems, in particular the need more fully to understand young people's risk behaviours. The chapter then turns its attention to the research literatures themselves. Reflecting a pluralistic outlook, this section offers a critical review of a range of research evidence relating to young people's risk behaviours, from large survey data to small, localised ethnographies, focusing in particular on their cannabis and smoking related beliefs and behaviour.

Chapter 3 describes and discusses many aspects of the study's methodology and considers their practical application in a research setting. It begins with a brief critique of how questions relating to ontology and epistemology helped to shape the choices that were made in designing this research project. It then goes on to discuss how the ethical dimensions of the research process were managed. Finally, it describes the conduct of the study itself, reflecting whenever appropriate on problematic aspects and how these were resolved. A published paper on the study's use of the paired interview method appears in Appendix 6 and provides a comprehensive discussion of this aspect of the project's methodology.

The next five chapters comprise the data analysis from the study. This analysis is based on data from all thirty interviews, and therefore includes the perspectives of both users and non-users of cannabis and cigarettes. In order to explore young people's cannabis use in context, a broad analytical framework incorporating a range of social contexts was developed. These reflect key contexts within which young people live out their lives - family, peers, local neighbourhood and broader aspects of

culture. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 each cover one particular context. Chapter 4 begins with the family context, and focuses in particular on two themes. It begins with an exploration of young people's perspectives on how knowledge of their cannabis use is managed within the family and then goes on to discuss the role of older siblings in helping to shape young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. Reflecting the importance of young people's relationships with friends and peers at this stage in their lives, Chapter 5 turns its attention to the peer context. It looks in particular at the possible significance of apparent gender variations and different types of leisure cultures on how boys and girls relate to cannabis. Young people's lives are also partly played out within the context of their local neighbourhood and Chapter 6 looks at how aspects of young people's local environment may affect their choices and behaviour. By presenting data from two contrasting interview settings, this chapter provides a comparative perspective. Chapter 7 focuses its lens even wider, exploring how broad aspects of culture may affect young people's relationship with cannabis and other substances. In particular, it discusses young people's perspectives on the ongoing debate about cannabis deregulation. It concludes with an exploration of participants' views on the influence of two particular aspects of popular culture on young people's health related beliefs and behaviour - the influence of role models, and the impact of television advertising.

Reflecting on the inter-relationship between cannabis and cigarettes, the final data chapter, Chapter 8, turns its attention to how young people distinguish between these two behaviours. In particular, it focuses on how participants relate the concept of 'addiction' to cannabis and cigarettes. It concludes with a discussion of the role of cannabis in supporting and sustaining young people's cigarette smoking.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, takes an overview, discussing the theoretical and methodological significance of the study. It begins with a critical summary of the findings from each of the data chapters and reflects on how they contribute to our understanding of young people's risk behaviours, and their cannabis use in particular. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for health promotion, policy and practice.

**Introduction**

As noted in the introductory chapter, this thesis will present findings from a study which aims to explore the role of cannabis in young people's lives. As a way of doing this, the study has developed a model which takes the social contexts of young people's lives as its starting point. In this way, participants' cannabis and other health related beliefs, attitudes and behaviour can be understood within the broader contexts of their everyday lives. The study also aims to explore the links between young people's cannabis and tobacco use, building in particular on findings from a number of earlier studies. Since the existing bodies of literature on drugs and tobacco are vast, this review will be selective, drawing upon a relatively small, but relevant proportion of these literatures. Deciding which literatures are relevant and engaging with these in a critical way, however, requires clarity about which perspectives have informed this particular project. The introductory section of this review will therefore begin with a discussion of these perspectives and conclude with a summary of the literatures which will be covered in the remainder of the review.

**'Health promotion' - a contested concept**

This study is primarily a health promotion project which aims to inform policy and practice in this discipline. In particular, it has explored young people's own perspectives on tobacco and cannabis use, locating these data within the wider social context of young people's lives. It has drawn primarily upon sociological perspectives, applying these in a number of ways. In the first instance, this approach contributes to a critique of both 'health' and 'health promotion', taking as its starting point the assumption that these are essentially contested concepts. 'Health promotion' has been used in a variety of ways by different individuals and organisations - professionals, politicians, interest groups and members of numerous disciplines have attempted to appropriate the field for themselves. In recent years, the dominant definition of health as 'the absence of disease' has given way to more holistic approaches which define health not only in physical terms, but also in terms of mental, social and emotional health and well-being (WHO, 1985, 1986). Hence, health promotion is generally taken to be an umbrella term which includes all those activities intended to prevent disease, improve health and enhance well-being. It remains, however, a problematic concept (Naidoo & Wills, 1998). Nowadays, health promotion has become everyone's business, with many occupational groups claiming a role in promoting health. Its multi-disciplinary nature means that health promotion

practitioners work in different paradigms, reflecting different beliefs, values, theories and ways of working (Bunton & MacDonald, 1992). Many health practitioners, however, work within the dominant paradigm of western science which has a mechanistic view of the body, seeing 'health' as the antithesis of disease.

Theories derived from social psychology have tended to dominate the field, leading many health promotion practitioners to an emphasis on behaviour change and 'risk' identification (Becker, 1974, Bandura, 1977, 1986, Ajzen, 1991, Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). Many GPs, for example, regard the reduction or absence of illness as a principal aim and hence focus their efforts around preventative medicine, attempting to influence people to adopt healthier lifestyles (Hopton, 1996). We know, for example, that smoking is the most important cause of avoidable ill health and premature death in Scotland (SODH, 1999). By far the greatest scope for reducing ill health and death from lung cancer and other diseases is therefore through smoking prevention and cessation. The logic of social psychology has led to a focus on the relationship between the behaviour and the disease. Nowadays, few strategies to reduce smoking behaviour are based on the simplistic assumption that somehow smokers do not know that smoking is harmful. Indeed, some figures suggest that as many as 75% of smokers want to give up and are aware of its risks (OPCS, 1994). However, some programmes which continue to emphasise behavioural change have been criticised for 'victim-blaming' and for failing to take into account the broader circumstances of people's lives (Naidoo & Wills, 1998). So far as young smokers are concerned, traditional health education programmes which emphasise information provision have been shown to have no discernible impact on smoking behaviour (Nutbeam, 1993, Lantz et al, 2000). So theories and models of behaviour change such as the health belief model (Becker, 1974) and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), while contributing to our understanding of how individuals make health-related decisions, have largely failed to explain how individual behaviour is constrained and influenced by wider factors (McKie, 1994, Wilkinson, 1994). The major limitation of health promotion informed by social psychology is that it fails to place smoking and other 'risk' behaviours in a wider context than merely lifestyle choice.

An alternative perspective views health, disease and illness as subject to influence by a range of biological, psychological, environmental and social factors, raising questions about which type of health promotion intervention is appropriate (Bunton & MacDonald, 1992, Beattie, 1993, Bunton et al, 1995, Ewles & Simnett, 1995).



For these practitioners, 'health' is a social value and a fundamental right and promoting health is primarily about addressing the root causes of ill health in the physical, social and economic environment. This approach has its roots in a set of guiding principles outlined by the World Health Organisation as part of its commitment to Health for All by the Year 2000 (WHO, 1986). According to this perspective, health promotion is not so much a set of specific activities, but, rather, a process which influences the way health promoters carry out their work. Working in a health promoting way means focusing on health - not illness, empowering people, recognising health as multi-dimensional and acknowledging that health is influenced by factors outwith individual control. Applying this approach to young people's smoking and other risk behaviours has led to the development of programmes which acknowledge and try to address the socio-cultural processes associated with these behaviours, rather than relying on simple information provision (Michell, 1997a, 1997b, Michell & Amos, 1997, Lowden & Powney, 1999, Fitzgerald et al, 2002). Questioning official, taken for granted assumptions about 'health' and 'health promotion' thus not only contributes to a critique of health promotion, but also potentially increases the effectiveness of health promotion. Asking young people to talk about their health-related behaviours provides a new perspective on how they understand 'health'. Attempting to understand these behaviours in the wider context of young people's social worlds can produce new insights about how to tackle these issues more effectively. Applying a sociological lens therefore shows us the limitations of relying solely on medical and behavioural perspectives. Only by recognising other notions of health and illness is it possible to understand the experience of everyday life. For a discipline which seeks to promote 'healthy behaviours' amongst a 'lay' population, these insights are clearly of considerable value.

However, while analyses of the links between social structures and relationships and individual actions have much to contribute to our understanding of young people's smoking and cannabis use and how changes to promote health may come about, the application of sociological perspectives is not without its problems. As noted in the introductory chapter, health promotion, far from being neutral, is embedded in socio-cultural and political frameworks which reflect the tension between different value positions about power, knowledge, responsibility and autonomy (Beattie, 1993). The legacy of health education's long association with social psychology has resulted in a lack of fit between knowledge, attitudes and practices in health promotion (Milburn, 1996). Thus, although theories which emphasise personal responsibility for health

are now under challenge, in practice, health promotion often remains firmly wedded to the goal of changing people's 'risky' behaviours, albeit within a broader framework of changing environments. This twin strategy is evident in recent government policy which highlights a commitment to addressing life circumstances, in particular tackling inequalities (SODH, 1999). However, addressing aspects of people's lifestyle, in particular, their 'risk' behaviours, remains a key goal at both policy and practice levels. In recent years, a greater emphasis on accountability within the NHS, in particular in relation to evidence-based practice, has also raised the question of which knowledge and evidence should inform health promotion. Just as health promotion is practised in a variety of ways, so too is health promotion research. The next part of this review will outline the perspective on research which has guided this study and summarise the literatures which will be reviewed.

### **Research for health promotion - a pluralistic enterprise**

Epidemiological methods have traditionally been seen as the gold standard for studying public health problems. As public health has broadened from its focus on medical and behavioural models to incorporate a socio-environmental approach, so the questions asked by public health researchers have become more complex and embedded in social, political and economic factors. Social science, in addition to epidemiology, offers a range of complementary investigative tools for exploring these issues, most relying on interpretive, qualitative methods. Until recently, methodological debate has tended to be polarised, focusing in an oversimplistic way on the suitability of these different models for solving public health problems. Epidemiology has been decried as being relentlessly positivist and reductionist by some, while interpretative methods have been dismissed as 'soft' and subjective, incapable of adding to 'scientific' knowledge (Baum, 1995). This has been particularly evident in the addictions field where most behavioural research has fallen on either side of a quantitative/qualitative divide (McKeganey, 1995). On one side are those researchers who favour the use of surveys of randomly selected individuals, and on the other are those who rely on a range of qualitative methods, such as face to face interviewing and participant observation. This polarisation is rooted in very real concerns about the assumed incompatibility of these models in terms of their response to questions of ontology, epistemology, methodology and method (an issue which will receive greater attention in the methodology chapter).

Many researchers now argue, however, that while these differences require careful and critical consideration, it is unhelpful to reject particular methods simply because

they are associated with a particular paradigm (Tilford & Delaney, 1992). Others point out that this polarised picture does not accurately reflect reality, for example, many social scientists work within a positivist tradition (Baum, 1995). The logic of these positions is that choice of method ought to be determined, not by strict adherence to a particular paradigm, but by the research questions being investigated. Large scale surveys can highlight patterns and trends and identify relationships between the complex interactions between the psychological, social and environmental influences on a person's behaviour. But qualitative methods are more suited to exploring the processes by which these factors are mediated at the level of individual experience. Bringing these two approaches together in a multi-method format perhaps offers the greatest potential in furthering our understanding of pathways to young people's substance use (Barnard & Frischer, 1995, McKeganey, 1995). Such an approach does not deny the differences between inductive and deductive designs, but seeks to use such differences to aid interpretation, leading to greater understanding (Rhodes & Moore, 2001).

### **Researching young people's perspectives**

As noted earlier, health promotion is influenced by prevailing social values and ideologies and hence is itself subject to socio-cultural processes (Lupton 1995). This has been particularly evident in young people's research where theories derived from developmental psychology have dominated our understanding of children and childhood for at least the last century (Mayall 1999). Such theories have focused attention on children's 'otherness' and their progress towards 'sameness', that is, towards adulthood. Paradoxically, developmental psychology has been both individualist and universalist in its scope and focus - individualist in its emphasis on the young person divorced from social context, and universalist in its quest to find 'truths' applying to all children (Mayall 1996). In a research context, until very recently, the logic of developmental psychology has limited young people's involvement to the role of passive object, simply there to be observed or investigated. Additionally, just as adults have traditionally controlled young people's lives through established customs and social policies that structure their access to social and physical worlds, so adult researchers have defined their agendas according to circumscribed understandings about what young people are and what knowledge about them is needed. Whilst motivated by a benevolent desire to protect, such research not only attempts to study young people divorced from their social context, it also denies them a voice. From an ethical standpoint this is problematic, given current legislative and policy contexts promoting young people's rights.

This is particularly true of the health arena where it is increasingly acknowledged that existing health education messages and interventions have little impact on large sections of the youth population. Drug use in general, and young people's drug use in particular, have been subject to a discourse which has tended to write off young drug users as 'losers', alienated from their families, unable to resist peer pressure, attracted to risk and excitement and with no respect for authority (HMSO, 1994). Studies which highlight young people's own perspectives, however, often paint a different picture. Such studies show, for example, that it is only a minority of young drug users for whom some of these negative stereotypes have any truth (Hendry et al, 1993, Perri 6 et al, 1997, Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). These studies offer an alternative view of young people's drug taking as part of a leisure-centred lifestyle which is driven by consumerism rather than deviance. This new approach requires a shift in thinking about children and young people as recipients of health promotion efforts on their behalf to children and young people as partners in health promotion whose views and concerns about health are accepted as valid in their own right and whose competence to make and implement decisions is recognised (McQueen et al, 1992).

Health promotion, then, is a multi-disciplinary endeavour requiring a pluralistic approach. Social psychology has contributed to our understanding of human behaviour, in particular the ways in which people make health-related decisions. Applying a sociological lens offers additional, alternative perspectives, for example, revealing 'healthy choices' as an expression of prevalent social norms and values, constructed and constrained by socially organised power relations. Young people themselves are a distinct social group with their own unique perspectives on their own lives. The literatures covered in this review will therefore emphasise these perspectives whilst offering a critical commentary on the contributions made by research informed by alternative ideas. Both the smoking and drugs literatures are vast and, taking a pluralistic outlook, this review will attempt to include findings from studies with a range of designs, from large national surveys to small ethnographies. Coverage will include both tobacco and drugs and where possible, cannabis in its own right.

Rather than seeing young people's cigarette smoking, on the one hand, and their cannabis use, on the other, as somehow separate and distinct, for the most part, these literatures will be discussed together. This approach is problematic, given the



different legal status attached to cigarette smoking and cannabis use in the UK and beyond. Although the Home Secretary has recently taken the decision to downgrade cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug, it remains illegal and hence is likely to occupy a different cultural position from tobacco. However, this study has purposefully aligned cannabis use more closely with cigarette smoking than with use of hard drugs for a number of reasons. In particular, the study aims to build on the findings of a number of earlier studies which have highlighted apparent links between young people's cannabis use and their cigarette smoking. These studies suggest that for some young people, their cannabis use may support and sustain their cigarette smoking in a number of ways (Albutt et al, 1995, Bell et al, 1998). Many recent studies also highlight young people's cannabis use as part of a constellation of recreational substance use behaviours which usually include cigarettes and alcohol (Miller & Plant, 1996, Balding, 2000, ISD Scotland, 2002). This is not to deny, though, that some young people also use other illegal drugs in these kinds of recreational contexts, nor that young people's substance use is always non-problematic. However, for the purposes of this study which aims to investigate young people's cannabis use during their early teenage years, it makes more sense to explore cannabis in relation to cigarette smoking. Given that there is very little literature on the social contexts of young people's cannabis use, it is prudent to draw upon the smoking literature as well as on other ethnographic studies of drug use.

In order to gain an insight into the scope of young people's tobacco and cannabis use, the review will begin with a critique of survey data from both a local and national perspective. In addition to data which relates to individual health behaviours, this section will also include data which shows associations between a range of health behaviours. The remainder of the review will turn its attention to studies which explore young people's health behaviours in context and studies which draw upon young people's own perspectives. This final section will cover a range of aspects including pathways in young people's cannabis use, the role of 'peer pressure' in shaping young people's health-related behaviour, and the role of cigarettes and cannabis in shaping or reflecting aspects of young people's identity.

### **Smoking amongst young people**

Data on patterns and trends in the health behaviours of young Scots come from two principal sources. The first source is the Office for National Statistics (ONS) time series of surveys of secondary schoolchildren which have been conducted biennially since 1992. This is a national survey of children aged 12-15 in Scotland (11-15 in

England) conducted at UK level and providing separate Scottish data. This review reports on findings from the last two surveys (ONS, 1999, Boreham & Shaw, 2001). In a recent development, the ONS survey has been replaced by a new survey, the Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey (SALSUS) which allows a broad based approach to the monitoring of substance use among secondary school children in Scotland (ISD Scotland, 2002). The second source is the Health Behaviours of School-aged Children (HBSC) surveys which form part of the World Health Organisation Cross-Sectional HBSC study (HBSC, 1990, 1994, 1998). This review reports on findings from the most recent of these studies (Griesbach & Currie, 2001). An important additional study is the MRC West of Scotland Twenty-07 Study (West, 1990, West et al, 1999).

Evidence from the most recent Scottish ONS study shows a reduction in the prevalence of 'regular' (one or more cigarettes per week) smoking in 12-15 year olds from 15% in 1982 to 10% in 2000 (Boreham & Shaw, 2001). This decrease, however, is almost entirely attributable to a decrease among males, particularly 15 year old males, notably in the period 1996-2000 with female smoking rates remaining much more stable over time. Findings from the most recent HBSC study, however, show an increase in 'daily smoking' from 1990, through 1994 to 1998 in each age group (11, 13 & 15) for both males and females, showing rates of smoking among Scottish 15 year olds as among the highest in Europe (Griesbach & Currie, 2001). In the HBSC study, data were collected through the use of self-completion questionnaires given out in schools by classroom teachers who had received instructions regarding survey administration. Classification of smoking behaviour was based solely on self-reports with 'daily smokers' defined as those who reported smoking every day. Only a small proportion of young people fitted the category of 'occasional smoker' - those who reported smoking at least once a week but not every day, or who reported smoking less than once a week. As a result, these young people were often classified together with 'non-smokers' and compared to 'daily smokers'.

These apparently contradictory findings highlight a major problem with surveys of this sort which rely on self reports and use different definitions of smoking. Self-reporting may be vulnerable to both over and under reporting because of the potential influence of social norms and attitudes among different groups of young people (Marsh et al, 1989). However, some research on the accuracy of self-report data argue that such data are valid particularly when internal checks for verifying the consistency of responses such as anonymous completion of questionnaires and, in

the case of drugs research, the inclusion of 'dummy' drugs (Barnea et al, 1987). It is also possible that national prevalence figures may actually mask the social complexity of behaviours like tobacco consumption. The widely used OPCS criterion of one cigarette per week to define 'regular smoker' (Goddard & Higgins, 1999) may serve to obscure considerable differences in the behaviours and meanings that young people classified in this way attach to their smoking. One recent study identified three qualitatively different groups of 'regular smoker' - those who smoke solely in one social situation or with one group of friends, those who smoke in multiple social situations and with various groups of friends, and those who smoke both with friends and alone (Pavis et al, 1996).

Another study, examining apparent discrepancies in research findings on the association between smoking and social class, found that the extent to which teenage smoking is patterned by social class depends on the definition of smoking adopted (Sweeting & West, 2001). This study found that while the likelihood of regular (weekly) smoking shows a positive class gradient (increasing with declining social class), that of occasional (less than weekly) smoking shows the reverse. Thus, studies which adopt a 'current' definition are least likely to show a positive gradient because the patterning of 'occasional' and 'regular' smoking run in opposite directions. This has the effect of masking the increased likelihood that it is teenagers in the lowest social classes who tend to smoke more heavily and consequently suffer more from nicotine dependency and longer term health problems. Other evidence from the Twenty-07 study shows that beyond age 15, young people from different class backgrounds are equally likely to become regular smokers (West et al, 1999). This suggests that the well documented class gradient in smoking among Scottish adults is largely the result of the early onset and heavier smoking among working class youth.

The term 'smoker' itself may also be problematic when applied universally to both tobacco and cannabis use, since some cigarette smokers and cannabis users may not define themselves as 'smokers'. This may be partly due to the nature of the process of becoming a smoker which, far from being linear and straightforward, is actually complex and dynamic, a process which such categories are unable fully to capture. (Goddard, 1990, Conrad et al, 1992, Bell et al, 1999). Some young people may have an image of themselves as a non-smoker, whilst using cigarettes in certain circumstances (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). In the case of cannabis, some young people may perceive their cannabis and tobacco use behaviour differently, for

example, for some young people, being a 'smoker' may be inextricably linked with consuming cigarettes, but not cannabis.

The most recent national survey, SALSUS, while continuing the biennial series of surveys used to monitor national trends in smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in Scotland, incorporates items on health, lifestyle and social factors for the first time (ISD Scotland, 2002). A further important development is the provision of information at local as well as national level which will be disseminated through the network of Drug and Alcohol Action Teams. However, for the purposes of comparison, it is important to note that this new survey sampled pupils from S2 and S4, a change from previous national surveys which sampled pupils from S1 to S4. According to this new study, 8% of 13 year old pupils and 20% of 15 year olds reported being 'regular' smokers (one or more cigarettes every week). In both age groups, girls were more likely to be regular smokers than boys and while there has been a decline in the prevalence of regular smoking among 15 year old boys from a peak of 30% in 1996, to 16% in 2002, regular smoking has shown little change among 13 year old boys and girls and 15 year old girls over the previous twenty years.

Summarising the significance of these patterns and trends, a recent review notes that most young people have tried smoking by age 15, when about 1 in 5 are smoking regularly with rates continuing to rise into early adulthood (West & Sweeting, 2002). This review also concludes that there may be some cause for optimism so far as boys' smoking is concerned. Although important gender differences in smoking appear to emerge at age 13, an important qualification is that males tend to smoke more cigarettes than females and there is some evidence that males who do smoke experiment with smoking at an earlier age. Rates of smoking among young people, then, remain a matter of considerable concern. The next part of this review will focus on patterns and trends associated with young people's cannabis use, mainly from a Scottish perspective and the links between young people's licit and illicit drug use.

### **Cannabis - the illicit drug of choice amongst young people**

Most surveys on drug use focus on drugs in general, rather than cannabis in particular. These studies tell us that throughout Scotland and the rest of the UK, young people experiment with cannabis far more than any other illicit drug. A national survey conducted in 1995 has shown that Scotland appears to have higher



levels of cannabis use than other parts of the U.K., with 43% of boys and 38% of girls aged 15/16 reporting that they had used the drug at some point in their lives (Miller & Plant, 1996). A recent ONS study, again using 'ever used' as its measure, reports remarkably similar findings, with 40% of boys and 37% of girls aged 15 reporting that they had tried cannabis (ONS, 1999). The most recent SALSUS survey confirms cannabis as the most widely used illicit drug among young people, with 31% of 15 year olds and 10% of 13 year old pupils reporting that they had used cannabis in the last year (ISD Scotland, 2002). Another recent study shows that cannabis experimentation is not confined to older teenagers, with around 10% of 11-12 year olds having experimented with illegal drugs, overwhelmingly cannabis (McKeganey & Norrie, 1999). Data from these surveys, however, are also useful for reminding us that by far the majority of young people report not using drugs at all. The SALSUS survey, for example, shows that 92% of boys and 95% of girls aged 13 report never having tried drugs at all, although this reduces significantly to 77% of boys and 81% of girls age 15 reporting that they have never tried drugs. A recent review confirms cannabis as by far the most popular drug, with at least 33% of young people having had some experience of cannabis by the age of 15 (West & Sweeting, 2002).

While measures of prevalence based on the category 'ever used' have to be treated with caution, experimentation with cannabis does appear to constitute a ubiquitous part of many young people's lives. This is confirmed by local surveys of Scottish cities which also show large numbers of young people reporting that they have 'ever used' cannabis or 'used cannabis in the past two months' (Crew 2000, 1996, Meikle et al, 1996, Barnard et al 1996). Recent studies of secondary school children living in rural communities also suggest that widespread experimentation with cannabis is not confined to urban areas of Scotland (Barnard & Forsyth 1998, Cooke et al, 1997, Galt, 1997, Forsyth & Barnard 1999) while a study of drug use in independent schools demonstrates that high levels of young people trying cannabis is a phenomenon that crosses class lines (Forsyth et al, 1998).

### **The links between young people's licit and illicit drug use**

Cannabis and cigarette smoking are clearly linked since in the UK, cannabis is usually smoked with tobacco (Young 1971). Across the UK, cannabis use has been shown to be high among cigarette smokers; furthermore, the greater the level of smoking, the greater the likelihood of cannabis use (Miller & Plant, 1996). A similar relationship has also been reported in a survey which sampled schoolchildren from

all over the country (Balding, 1996). Recent Scottish surveys in the HBSC series also confirm this association. One study shows that over 60% of 15 year olds who claim to have used cannabis three or more times are daily smokers, whereas among 15 year olds who have never tried cannabis, only 4% smoke daily (Todd, Currie, & Smith 1999). A later study also shows that daily smokers, both boys and girls, were significantly more likely to report having been drunk more than ten times (Griesbach & Currie, 2001). The latest SALSUS study also links young people's use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs. While these figures do not differentiate between different drugs, since cannabis was by far the most frequently used drug reported by young people in this study, it seems reasonable to assume that in most cases, the following associations relate to cannabis. These findings show that 44% of girls and 35% of boys reported that they were also drinking alcohol the last time they had used drugs, this association growing stronger with age (ISD Scotland, 2002). Of pupils who were weekly drinkers, 40% had also used drugs in the last month, compared with 1% of non-drinkers. Pupils who smoked were also more likely to be weekly drinkers. Among regular smokers (pupils who report smoking one or more cigarettes every week) 68% drank weekly whereas only 11% of non-smokers drank weekly. Smokers who drank alcohol were also more likely to be regular smokers. A recent review of surveys of drug misuse among young people throughout the UK confirms that tobacco and alcohol use (particularly drunkenness) are associated with cannabis use (Barnard, 1997).

These findings seem to provide strong evidence that tobacco, alcohol and cannabis form part of a constellation of youthful 'risk' behaviours. As noted earlier, though, features of study design, in particular a cross-sectional design and a reliance on lifetime prevalence measures of cannabis use, mean that these data are limited in how much they can tell us about which young people may move beyond experimentation or the particular pathways into drugs that young people take. Until recently there has been little work in Britain specifically considering pathways into drug use. Longitudinal work on patterns of drug use in the United States suggests that in broad terms, the movement is from use of tobacco and alcohol to the use of cannabis (Kandel, 1980, Newcomb & Bentler, 1986). There is no necessary progression from cannabis use to other drugs or to drug dependency, although it is true that most people dependent on drugs such as heroin or cocaine have used a wide spectrum of illicit drugs often beginning with cannabis (Barnard, 1997). As noted earlier, some recent Scottish studies suggest that today, smoking cannabis may introduce some young people to tobacco and subsequently to cigarette smoking

(Allbutt et al, 1995, Bell et al, 1998). These studies confirm that for some young people, their cannabis use is intertwined with their cigarette smoking behaviour, with increases in cannabis use leading to increases in cigarette smoking. What is new in these studies, however, is the suggestion that cannabis may have the potential to introduce some young people to cigarette smoking. The next part of this review will focus on studies which add to our understanding of young people's risk behaviours by charting patterns over time and by situating these risk behaviours in the broader context of young people's social worlds.

### **Pathways to young people's cannabis use**

As noted earlier, many studies now use a multi-method design which combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies, some also incorporating a longitudinal perspective. These longitudinal studies in particular have great potential for furthering our understanding of pathways to substance use and the meanings young people attach to these behaviours. A recent Scottish study which followed 15 year olds from their last compulsory year at school for the next two years has highlighted some of the social mechanisms that lie behind well-known relationships about young people's smoking behaviour (Bell et al, 1999). Building on previous research with younger age groups (Conrad et al, 1992) which show that those who smoke are more likely to have friends who smoke, drink alcohol regularly, and have a high income relative to their peers, this longitudinal study highlighted the significance of the wider transitions taking place in young people's lives on their smoking behaviour. By combining longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data, this study was able to show that the period between 15 and 17 is marked by significant transitions in several aspects of young people's lives and that the processes involved in becoming a regular cannabis user are inextricably linked with these transitions. Findings from this study also support other recent studies, reviewed in the next part of this chapter, which challenge the 'peer pressure' model, suggesting instead that 'peer affiliation' is much more important (May, 1993, Coggans & McKellar, 1994, Michell, 1997a, Michell & Amos, 1997).

In one of the studies referred to earlier (Bell et al, 1998), the researchers used a case study approach to explore the meaning and use of cannabis among young men over an eighteen month period. Building on Becker's seminal ethnography (Becker, 1963), these data highlight the significance of the friendship group as a locus for contact with cannabis and as a means of learning about its use. In mapping the changing social context of young people's lives and associated health related behaviours, this

study was also able to distinguish between social lives which appear to have become 'cannabis oriented' and those which continue to be broadly alcohol-oriented. As noted above, this study also highlighted the potential for cannabis to support and sustain young people's cigarette smoking behaviour, a finding which is of particular interest in the context of this review.

Another recent longitudinal study used in-depth interviews with a sample of older teenagers to collect oral histories of participants' initiation and early experimental experiences of drugs (Parker et al, 1998). The study identified four distinctive 'drugs pathways' - regular current drug users, abstainers, ex-triers and those in transition - as a way of making sense of how young people develop attitudes and behaviours relating to drugs over time. These data showed that most first-time experiences were with cannabis, with relatively few of these cannabis experimenters going on to use other drugs. The authors argue that nowadays many young people are 'drugwise', that is, they differentiate between the range of drugs readily available on the youth market in terms of their effects, both positive and negative. According to this perspective, 'recreational' drug use, in particular cannabis, has become 'normalised', at least among some groups of young people. Others argue, however, that although there is strong empirical evidence that the proportion of young people using drugs at some point in their lives is growing, there is little evidence to support the idea that it is widely accepted as 'normal' (Shiner & Newburn, 1997, Wibberley & Price, 2000, Shildrick, 2002). Shiner and Newburn in particular are critical of the 'normalisation' thesis because it relies to some extent on survey data which asks young people if they have ever used drugs. They argue that this reliance on lifetime measures exaggerates the extent of drug use, over-simplifies the choices that young people make, and pays insufficient attention to the meanings that drug use has for them. Their own study found that most young people held fairly conservative views on illegal drug use, irrespective of whether they had taken drugs or not, and while warning against complacency, they argue that this suggests that illicit drug use is not widely perceived as 'normal' by many young people. Reporting on the most recent evidence from the North West England Longitudinal Study, Parker and his colleagues offer a refinement to their 'normalisation' thesis, concluding that 'sensible' recreational cannabis use is becoming increasingly accommodated into the social lives of conventional young adults (Parker et al, 2002). They base this conclusion on data relating to five key dimensions of 'normalisation' - availability/access, drug trying rates, accommodating attitudes to 'sensible' recreational drug use especially by non-users, and degree of cultural accommodation of illegal drug use.



Rather than focusing on drug use itself, other studies have attempted to situate these behaviours within the wider context of young people's social worlds. One important Scottish study followed over 10,000 young people over a four year period. By complementing a longitudinal approach with qualitative interview data, this study was able to generate rich, comprehensive data charting young people's transition from childhood through their active and challenging teenage years to young adulthood (Hendry et al, 1993). A major contribution of this study was its finding that although large numbers of young people experiment with cigarette smoking, a relatively small proportion, around 14%, continue to engage in this behaviour with any regularity. Of crucial importance, however, is that those who appear to be putting their health at risk through heavy smoking are those who live in socially disadvantaged circumstances. Findings from this study also challenge the tendency for those concerned with health promotion to group cannabis with other illegal drugs. Young people's own cultures often deny that cannabis is harmful, viewing it as less dangerous than alcohol, both in terms of quantities consumed and the fact that it is less likely than drink to provoke violent behaviour (Hendry et al, 1991, Hendry et al, 1993, Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). These findings suggest new directions for how health promotion can more effectively tackle youthful smoking and cannabis use, issues which will be discussed more fully in the final chapter of this thesis. This study also confirmed the significance of the peer group as a particularly significant context within which young people's health-related views and attitudes are shaped and risk behaviours are acted out, and it is to this context that the next part of this review now turns.

### **'Peer pressure' as an explanation for young people's substance use**

Psycho-social models of risk and psychological theories of behaviour continue to be influential in providing explanations relating to why young people engage in risk behaviours. From this perspective, these behaviours are conceived of as volitional and individualistic, related to negative personal traits such as poor self image and low self esteem. The assumption is that some young people are vulnerable to 'peer group pressure' and other influences and it is these factors which explain why many young people smoke, drink and use drugs. This perspective has led to the widespread assumption that young people are often pressurised into these behaviours by their substance using friends by means of bullying, ridicule or through threatened ostracism from the group. Many studies do, in fact, show that young people are more likely to take up smoking or try drugs if they associate with friends who are already engaged in these behaviours (Coggans & McKellar, 1994, Farrell & White,

1998). However, many studies are now beginning to challenge the uncritical application of the term 'peer pressure' to describe this connection, showing peer selection rather than peer influence to be a more significant dynamic (Bauman & Ennett, 1996). According to this perspective, the attitudes and behaviour within any given peer group is likely to be the product of the fact that young people tend to associate with like-minded individuals (Cohen, 1977, Coggans & McKellar, 1994). Two studies on young people's cannabis use, for example, found that 'peer pressure' played only a minor role in young people's experimentation with the drug (Shepherd et al, 1985, 1987). So, rather than the group going after the young person, it would appear that the person who wishes to experiment with, or use drugs on a regular basis, is more likely to seek out a drug-using group. From this perspective, understanding and addressing young people's risk behaviours can only be achieved by paying heed to the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between individuals and their peers.

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about 'peers'? Until recently, this term has tended to be used unproblematically, and yet, notions of who comprise peers vary considerably in the literatures on young people's risk behaviours, making it difficult to trace or unravel these social processes. One study on smoking has compared susceptibility to influence from different sectors of the peer social network, concluding that social influence is related to the closeness of relationships (Morgan & Grube, 1991). Other research, one an ongoing study with pre-teens, has similarly found that offers of a drug from people with whom a young person has a close relationship are particularly difficult to resist (McIntosh et al, 2002c). This latter study found it useful to distinguish three distinct groups of 'peers' - a small number of close friends with whom the young person spent most of their time, a wider circle of peers with whom the young person associated regularly, and casual acquaintances with whom the young person was familiar but would only meet sporadically and did not count as friends. While this study also found the context of the drug offer to be an important factor, of particular significance for this discussion of 'peers' was the finding that the closer the relationship, the harder it was to decline the offer. Other large studies, some of longitudinal design, highlight the significance of the best friend rather than the broader peer network in initiating and maintaining young people's smoking (Gerber & Newman, 1989, Eiser et al, 1991).

More recently, studies have attempted to build up profiles of young people's peer and friendship networks. These studies identify hierarchical structure as a key feature of

these networks, highlighting the kinds of 'pecking order' that characterise young people's relationships with one another and shedding new light on the complex social processes that influence smoking and other risk behaviours (Michell, 1997a, 1997b, Michell & Amos, 1997, Michell, 1999). It becomes clear that different groups of young people smoke for different reasons which are related to pecking order and group membership. For example, smoking was most likely among 'top girls' aiming to project a 'cool' image, amongst disillusioned and disenfranchised boys as part of a whole raft of risky and anti-social behaviours and also among some low-status pupils who saw smoking as one way of gaining entry to higher status groups. There was little evidence of young people experiencing coercive pressure to smoke, but a great deal of evidence implicating a desire to fit into certain groups.

So, psycho-social explanations for young people's substance use can be criticised because of their neglect of the significance of individual agency and the competence of young people to choose their companions by shared preference. This perspective has misinterpreted the influence of peers on young people's risk behaviours, trivialising social processes and social structure and failing to address the complex, variable and subtle nature of young people's experiences of 'peer pressure'. The studies reviewed above have shown that less direct influences, such as gentle encouragement, repeated offers, reassurance, and a desire on the part of the young person not to feel left out are perhaps more salient influences on young people's health-related attitudes and behaviours. As we have seen, only by talking in detail to young people themselves is it possible to access these kinds of insights. The final section of this review will therefore focus on a range of other research findings which are rooted in young people's own perspectives.

As noted earlier, this approach not only has theoretical significance, it also fits with recent developments in policy and practice in relation to children and young people. Recent changes in the legislative framework (United Nations, 1989, Children Act, 1989, Children (Scotland) Act, 1995 Human Rights Act, 2000) and associated shifts in social policy have radically altered views on children and young people as citizens and social actors. The rights of children to participate in society and to have their opinions taken into account on matters affecting their lives are now well established. Alongside these changes, developments in sociology have begun to transform the way in which children are viewed. This new approach emphasises the importance of providing appropriate social frameworks within which all children can develop, leading to research initiatives which explore young people's social relationships and

their role as active citizens (ESRC, 1998). Within the wider research community, the notion of children as valuable contributors to research has also received growing support (Hill et al, 1996, Mahon et al, 1996). Many studies are now beginning both to focus on young people's perspectives and to root young people's health behaviours within their social and cultural contexts. It is to these types of study that this review now turns.

### **Young people's risk behaviours in context**

An important American study conducted in the 1980s challenged the received wisdom of the time which tended to see drug taking as the result of psychological or social deficiencies, or a combination of the two, preferring instead to take as its starting point, young people's social locations (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987). Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and questionnaires, the researchers developed an approach they called 'a methodology for listening'. This study played a significant role in developing our understanding of young people's drug use, albeit in an American context, by highlighting the relationship between drug use and other features of adolescent worlds, suggesting that young people's drug taking can be best understood as but one activity among many within young people's social worlds, and one which does not necessarily define all aspects of their lives. Far from reinforcing previous stereotypical images of drug takers and their lives, this study revealed friendship, independence and competence as integral themes in young people's social worlds.

Taking as its starting point the need to put young people at the centre of the research process and to allow them to 'speak for themselves', a recent Scottish study generated accounts about health issues and concerns from the perspectives of young people themselves (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). Avoiding a health topic-centred approach, this study started with social context as its broad frame of reference and explored aspects of young people's health related beliefs and behaviour by exploring different levels of influence that impinge on young people's concepts of health. In this way, this study was able to chart some of the relationships between, for example, parental influences, the influence of peers and friends and local cultural norms on how young people think about and act out health related behaviours. This study challenges health education's traditional reliance on problem-based, adult-defined programmes, instead arguing for the adoption of a 'wellness perspective' which takes account of young people's own interests and concerns.



Ethnographic approaches have been particularly effective in illuminating the social processes which encourage and constrain risk behaviours, for example, in male prostitutes and female injecting drug users in Glasgow (Bloor et al, 1990, Taylor, 1993). This latter study identified that the lifestyle which evolves around their use of drugs seems to offer an arena in which women drug users are able to find a degree of independence and purpose otherwise lacking in their lives. As a result of these social processes, a drug using lifestyle may seem attractive even when disadvantages become apparent (Taylor, 1993). In his classic work with cannabis-using musicians, Becker explored the processes that led to regular cannabis use (Becker, 1963). Rejecting the logic of existing theories of the time that tended to view cannabis use in terms of deviance or personal inadequacy, he focused instead on pathways to becoming a cannabis user. He found regular cannabis use to be the result of a particular sequence of three events - initially smoking cannabis, later feeling its effects, and subsequently enjoying its effects. This research introduced an entirely new perspective on cannabis - the idea that people may use it because they enjoy it once they have learned to use it.

A recent Scottish study has likewise drawn upon this approach. As noted earlier, the idea that young people's cannabis use has become 'normalised' has been criticised as over-simplistic. Rather than asking the question, "is cannabis use normal?" perhaps a more appropriate question is, "when and how is cannabis use normal?". A study of young men's street culture, while not setting out to investigate this question, nonetheless sheds light on the issue (Pavis & Cunningham-Burley, 1999). Moving beyond a focus on the 'risk' factors associated with health relevant behaviours, this study revealed the central roles of smoking, drinking and illicit drugs (especially cannabis) within young people's street cultures, which it argues, in turn, arise from complex social, economic and historical conditions as well as the contextualised choices of young people themselves. This study showed how many young men appear to view their cannabis use in a totally different light from use of harder drugs which, by and large, they consider to be in a different league. For these young men, using cannabis was closely linked to aspects of their social identity as well as to a culture of story telling. In policy and practice terms, this study highlighted the limitations of trying to address 'risk' factors without paying attention to context. Giving substance to the rhetoric of recent government policy, the authors make a strong case for locating lifestyle risk behaviours within broader life circumstances. The clear message is that only by addressing risk conditions can health promotion

programmes hope to reduce risk behaviours. This study generated contextualised accounts of young people's health relevant behaviour by using participant observation, a classic ethnographic approach. As noted by the researchers themselves, however, this method holds particular challenges and in its quest for depth, often has to sacrifice generalisability. Given the study's eventual focus on a small group of young men aged 15-16, this is particularly true in terms of how much can be inferred about younger boys' and young women's experiences of street life. Nonetheless, the study makes a considerable contribution to our understanding of young people's risk behaviours.

### **Risk taking, style and identity**

Another body of smoking research has developed, focusing on the relationship between style, identity and youthful smoking (Albutt et al, 1995, Amos et al, 1997, Gray et al, 1997, Lloyd et al, 1997, Lucas & Lloyd, 1999, Rugkasa et al, 2001, Plumridge et al, 2002). One Scottish study recruited young people from both school and community settings. Using focus groups to generate data, this study found that cigarette smoking was predominantly a social and group activity about which young people often held ambivalent and contradictory attitudes (Albutt et al, 1995). Of particular significance, this study was the first to produce findings which suggest that some young people may be being introduced to tobacco through smoking cannabis and that this can lead to them starting to smoke cigarettes. Other studies have uncovered a complex but important relationship between the social image of smoking and young people's self and aspirational images (Amos et al, 1997, Gray et al, 1997). This research highlighted not only smoking, but also drugs, as important in helping young people to develop and maintain a strong and acceptable self image, this relationship varying by age and gender. This work suggests a promising new direction for health promotion - one which taps into and explores these diversities and supports young people to achieve their desired image without putting their future health at risk. Another recent study conducted with a sample of New Zealand young people, has explored the implications of smoking refusal for personal identity style, highlighting the role of smoking as a key signifier of power and status (Plumridge et al, 2002). This work has revealed that being a non-smoker carries connotations of being 'average', presenting non-smokers with the problem of competing against superior 'smoker cool' groups. While boys were able to establish alternatives to 'smoker cool' through physical activity, girls struggled to accredit themselves as worthy and had little choice but to accept their inferior status. A limitation of this study is that it relied on data generated from only one secondary school. As a result,

the findings may reflect a 'school effect' rather than be representative of a wider constituency of young people. Its effective use of paired interview as well as focus group data, however, adds weight to the emerging significance of friendship pairs in generating data about young people's health behaviour.

Research of this kind clearly provides important theoretical insights into context and meaning which illuminate the social and cultural contexts of risk taking and avoidance. These studies highlight the value of examining the social contexts of young people's risk behaviours. Only by situating actions and taking account of the meanings and motivations underlying these behaviours is it possible to gain an adequate understanding which will inform the development of effective interventions aimed at those young people who are most at risk. In privileging depth over breadth, these qualitative studies confirm the value of eliciting authentic accounts from young people about aspects of their risk taking behaviour (Shucksmith & Pratt, 2002). They show, for example, that as with smoking, young people are generally far more active and instrumental in their cannabis use than had previously been assumed.

Highlighting the limitations of behaviourist approaches, they also show us that in many cases, young people's knowledge base about maintaining their own health is high but that aspects of the social contexts within which they spend their leisure time are often more salient. They also highlight the fact that young people are not a homogenous group - they lead diverse lives circumscribed by a range of structural factors but also by factors operating at many other levels. The important relationship between young people's risk behaviours and issues relating to image and identity is another overarching theme which is illuminated by this body of research. The need to 'fit in' is revealed as a powerful driver in young people's lives but far from implying coercive pressure, most young people appear to make active choices about friendship groups and their characteristics - in many cases, individual young people choose groups, and not the other way around. These studies also show that many, but by no means all, conventional young people are routinely involved in a constellation of 'risk' behaviours - mainly smoking, drinking and occasional cannabis use - also highlighting the important relationship between young people's involvement in these behaviours and aspects of their leisure cultures. A few studies have also shed new light on the relationship between tobacco and cannabis use, an important finding in the context of continuing high levels of smoking among young people and the recent decision to downgrade cannabis. Noting that some young people may be introduced

to cigarette smoking as a result of their cannabis use, this new finding perhaps flags up a new perspective for smoking cessation programmes to consider.

These insights, then, are significant both from a sociological point of view and for guiding policy and practice, particularly in the field of health education/health promotion, and this will be discussed more fully in the final discussion chapter. But they are also valuable from a methodological and an ethical perspective in terms of their contribution to the debate about effective ways of both researching young people's perspectives on aspects of their health related behaviour and developing appropriate responses. They highlight the fact, for example, that young people themselves value, and in general respond well to, approaches that treat them as autonomous individuals, with their own unique set of concerns and perspectives on a whole range of issues affecting their lives. As noted above, young research participants also appreciate approaches which avoid over-homogenising young people and which take account of their life circumstances. This means trying to ensure that a range of different voices are heard, necessitating a flexible approach to many aspects of study design, and an analytical framework which takes account of these differences. This work also highlights the importance of trying to work with young people's issues and concerns rather than imposing our own professional agendas, a particularly difficult challenge. This is important because the rhetoric of greater, more authentic participation by young people in the research process currently outstrips policy and practice in this area.

### **Young people's cannabis use in context - the scope of this study**

As noted at the beginning of this review, this study aims to shed light on the role of cannabis in young people's lives by exploring how it fits within the context of their everyday experiences. In keeping with current policy and practice imperatives which highlight the need for strategic approaches which work across sectors, the project adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, combining health promotion and sociology. Its theoretical orientation is grounded in an emerging tradition which highlights the value of exploring the social contexts of health related behaviours. According to this perspective, situating these behaviours in the broader contexts of young people's lives offers the best opportunity for more fully understanding the meanings and motivations of these behaviours in young people's lives, understandings which are crucial to the development of appropriate interventions. The survey data covered in this review confirm cannabis as the most common illicit drug tried by young people in Scotland and the UK, and in recent years it has seldom been out of the news for



long, as a debate continues about its regulation and the potential impact of any change on young people's beliefs and behaviour. This research, then, is clearly of contemporary policy relevance. Little is known, in particular about young people's use of cannabis in their early teenage years, and this study therefore has the potential to contribute new knowledge in an area of topical policy concern. There is also evidence to suggest that young people's cigarette smoking is intertwined with their cannabis use, so there is merit in further exploring the links between these two behaviours. Specifically, this study aims to build upon emerging findings from recent smoking and cannabis research which aims to find out more about how cannabis may have the potential to sustain and support cigarette smoking in some young people. More generally, this study will contribute to our understanding of young people's health and health related behaviours, enhancing the knowledge base about young people and their lives, particularly in relation to cannabis.

Listening to young people is now central to the policy process as well as day to day practice in relation to services for young people. By exploring young people's own beliefs and experiences through the use of qualitative interviewing, this study will add to the body of knowledge on young people's health generated from lay perspectives, as well as contributing to contemporary policy goals. Few studies have conducted health related research with young people in informal settings, fewer still have used friendship pairs as the major method for interviewing young people. This method is beginning to emerge, sometimes by default, as an effective way of generating young people's accounts. The current study builds on this development and has shown that this method can be the popular choice among young people themselves. This study will therefore add to methodological knowledge on young people's research by using friendship pairs as the main method for generating data.

This review has critically discussed a range of research, both quantitative and qualitative, and deriving from a range of theoretical perspectives, in order to assess the contribution of these literatures to our understanding of young people's health related behaviours. As noted earlier, because of the vast coverage of young people's risk behaviours in the existing literatures, it has been necessary to adopt a selective approach. Within these constraints, this review has attempted to explain the theoretical justification for this doctoral research project by focusing on particular studies, and it is perhaps inevitable that some important studies will have been neglected. It is also the case that while the project has been predominantly shaped and informed by the bodies of knowledge discussed in this review, other

unanticipated topics arose during the recursive process of data generation and analysis. For example, as more and more participants provided detailed accounts relating to how they perceive parents' attempts to manage their children's cannabis use, it became important to become familiar with the literature on parental monitoring strategies. Similarly, as the association between young people's cannabis use and certain aspects of social identity began to emerge, it seemed important to develop a broader understanding of this social process. In order to reflect their different role, these emerging literatures will be discussed in the context of the final discussion chapter rather than in this review. The next chapter will outline the methods for the project, assessing the relevant literature and describing in detail the design and methods used in the study.

## **CHAPTER 3:        METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The chapter that follows will begin by outlining the methodological approach for this project and will then go on to consider its practical application in a research setting. The first part will therefore explore some of the wider philosophical issues relating to empirical research, in particular debates around the nature of reality and different ways of 'knowing'. Such a discussion is necessary because it facilitates an awareness of the potential implications particular decisions may have during the course of a project (Seale, 1999). The second part of the chapter, while focusing on more practical concerns, is informed by a consideration of these philosophical debates (Mason, 1996). It will explain the research design and the rationale underpinning this and will then describe what happened during each part of the project as the study progressed. This part of the chapter will also provide a reflective commentary on issues that arose during the fieldwork and how these issues were resolved.

### **What is methodology and why is it important?**

Traditionally, quantitative methodologies have been closely associated with positivist claims that 'facts' and 'truths' can be produced objectively and that these can be directly observed by the researcher. Qualitative methodologies, on the other hand, have tended to be linked with 'subjectivities' - that is, with multiple versions of reality. A more recent perspective conceptualises these different approaches in terms of a methodological continuum (Silverman, 1997). According to this view, methodological decisions ought to depend, not on any particular philosophical position, but rather, on what you are trying to do. As noted in the introduction, this study is concerned with trying to understand young people's perspectives, a goal which seems particularly suited to a qualitative methodology. It seems appropriate, therefore, to focus this methodological discussion on this approach.

Qualitative research is generally understood as being concerned with understanding and interpreting a multi-layered and complex social world. Its methods of data generation tend to be flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced and it aims to produce rounded understandings derived from a detailed exploration of rich, contextual data. However, within this common framework, qualitative research is driven by a competing range of philosophical underpinnings and methodological techniques and practices (Mason, 1996). The contested nature of qualitative research centres on two key issues - the status of 'knowledge' and the

'reality' that research produces. Epistemological debates centre around different ways of 'knowing' while competing ontological perspectives refer to different versions of the nature and essence of social realities. At the far end of this spectrum, some post-modern traditions take the view that there is no such thing as 'reality' at all and that all knowledge is constructed and contextually relative. An awareness of these epistemological and ontological distinctions is important because this enables researchers to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world and what can be known about it. Mason also argues that there has to be a reasonable degree of consistency between these two elements since there has to be some logic between what you think you can know about the social world and the way you actually study it. The coherence of any research project, then, depends upon a serious consideration of these issues. Only by engaging critically with such methodological debates is it possible to weigh up different courses of action and to justify decisions made during the course of a project.

### **Choosing a methodology**

As noted above, choosing a research methodology depends ultimately on what you are trying to do. A key aim of this study is to shed further light on the meanings and use of cannabis and cigarettes in young people's lives. This aim itself implies certain philosophical positions. It assumes, for example, that reality is made up of social actors, in this case, young people, who have beliefs and experiences which they are able to communicate to a researcher. This aim also assumes that young people's accounts constitute 'knowledge' and that these accounts represent a particular social reality. These properties seem especially suited to a qualitative research tradition, but which particular tradition and which particular methods? Mason and others suggest a pragmatic approach to managing these kinds of methodological decision (Mason, 1996, Seale, 1999). Rather than trying to resolve methodological debates, ultimately a self-defeating exercise which will only hinder practice, they suggest using these debates as a 'resource' to aid decision-making. Adopting this approach allows me, the researcher, to step outside of the philosophical continuum while at the same time continuing to take seriously the ideas and goals of other researchers at both ends of the pole (Seale, 1999). So, rather than focusing on whether knowledge is real or not, this study assumes that knowledge about social worlds is possible - the challenge is to find a way of accessing this knowledge. Before going on to describe the actual conduct of the study, the next section will discuss how I used this practical approach to decide on a research design for this study. Drawing on a belief that it is both impossible and undesirable to discuss methodological issues in the absence of

an ethical framework, it will also highlight the ethical concerns that informed these decisions.

### **Choosing a research design**

An underpinning principle of this study is the way I 'see' young people. Far from being passive agents, young people actively construct and shape their social worlds and are able to report on and discuss their experiences (Alderson, 1995, Mayall, 1999). The design of this study must therefore be able to accommodate young people as active participants in the research process. The shifts in social policy and developments in sociology that have encouraged these new perspectives, however, have so far had more of an impact on research with very young children. Young people in their teenage years face a different set of challenges. Concerns about political apathy and alienation amongst many young people, for example, have contributed to a predominantly negative image of young people today. It is therefore important to find appropriate ways of accessing the motivations, experiences, attitudes and developing identities of these young people. Listening to young people's views about their lives is particularly important given that existing health education messages and interventions are increasingly shown to have little impact on behaviour (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). Research which is able to explore how young people conceptualise 'risks' and why they behave as they do when faced with them are clearly important for advancing our understanding and for informing health-related policy and practice (Pope & Mays, 1995). Recent government policy has identified young people's health behaviours as an important priority and acknowledged the importance of consulting young people themselves as equal partners as a vital element in informing research, policy and practice (Scottish Executive, 2001).

As noted above, qualitative methods in particular offer great potential in helping to develop theories about young people's beliefs and experiences in relation to health. Research of this kind is characterised by its focus on human agency and process, the way people interpret and experience events and situations and how these can change over time (Denscombe, 2001). Some researchers approach this task using observation, a method which may or may not include a participation role. This choice is underpinned by an ontological perspective which sees interactions and behaviours and the way people interpret them as central, and by an epistemological position which suggests that the social world can be 'known' by observing or participating in 'real life' settings (Mason, 1996). Researchers using this approach



may either 'enter into' or 'stand outside' the social world of those they wish to study, but both methods are problematic. Participant observation draws on notions of a shared 'standpoint' which, when applied simplistically, relies on the contested concept of epistemological privilege. Similarly, neither covert nor overt observation, are straightforward and both methods are often criticised for failing to take due account of a range of ethical concerns. On a practical level, however, ethnographic research often has much to commend it. One recent study has been effective in shedding new light on male youth street culture, locating young people's health-related behaviour within the broader contexts of their life circumstances (Pavis & Cunningham-Burley, 1999). This project gathered first-hand observations of young people's unstructured leisure periods, a goal well-suited to the ethnographic method. Many of the participants had been excluded from, or had trouble at, local youth facilities and this research design clearly facilitated access to this hard to reach population. As acknowledged by the researchers themselves, however, this method places many demands on fieldworkers and requires the resolution of a range of theoretical, practical and ethical issues.

An alternative method is qualitative interviewing. This may involve in-depth, semi-structured interviews - what Burgess calls 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984). Conversely, it may involve focus groups - group discussions which explore a specific set of issues. Focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data (Kitzinger, 1994). These methods draw upon similar ontological and epistemological positions to those underpinning participant observational methods. Interviewing places a clear emphasis on the perspectives and points of view of those who are being interviewed. It is also characterised by an interactive element which allows an exploration of how participants articulate and work out their responses, and hence adds depth to the research (Mason, 1996). This view of knowledge and evidence as contextual, situational and interactional requires a flexible and sensitive approach to getting at what you really want to know. This perhaps makes interviewing more appropriate than observational methods for the purposes of this study since it is easier to 'tailor-make' each interview. This approach is more likely to facilitate the goal of developing our understanding of young people's perspectives on cannabis use. On a practical level, some form of interviewing also seems better suited to the tasks of access and recruitment. Recent research has shown that recruiting participants from informal settings is particularly effective in accessing young people's accounts (Fast Forward, 1994). For both philosophical and practical reasons, therefore, it seems

reasonable to assume that some form of qualitative interviewing, rather than other qualitative methods, is likely to be the most appropriate and effective way of accessing this knowledge.

### **Styles of Interviewing**

A key assumption underpinning this study, then, is that it is possible to learn about young people's social worlds through qualitative interviewing. These interviews generate 'stories' and the challenge is to understand where and how these stories are produced and which sort of stories they are (Miller & Glassner, 1997). While this perspective treats the interview itself as a social construction, this is not to say that interview data are meaningless beyond the context in which they occur. It is important to be alert to the danger of 'romanticising' interview data (Silverman, 1993) but there are practical ways of avoiding this potential pitfall. In designing and conducting this study, I have addressed this issue in two main ways. Firstly, drawing on the constructionist concept of reflexivity, I have tried to adopt a highly reflexive practice, taking into account and reporting on many aspects of the research process. How did I gain access to research settings? How did I present myself within these settings? To what extent do I believe trust and rapport were achieved? What mistakes, misconceptions and misunderstandings arose during the interview process? Addressing these kinds of question and reflecting on how they may have influenced the research process has helped to reinforce the idea that interviews are sites where data are generated between an interviewer and interviewee(s) rather than occurring in any form of 'natural setting' (Dingwall, 1997, Mauthner et al, 1998).

The second strategy involves regarding 'knowledge' as always subject to possible revision by new evidence. This 'fallibilistic' perspective is rigorous and labour-intensive but an integral part of genuinely self-critical research (Seale, 1999). It means that from an early stage in the process of data generation, as ideas began to take shape, these had to be tested, revised and sometimes discounted in an ongoing recursive process. The young research participants themselves have been central to this reflexive process. For example, they sometimes challenged my assumptions and developing ideas, requiring me to revise my understandings. Sometimes, this would take the form of correcting or challenging something I had said, on other occasions, these reflexive insights derived from interactions between the participants themselves. This process played a key role in developing my methodological awareness and was central to enhancing the plausibility of my developing analysis.

Having identified qualitative interviewing as the most appropriate method in this study, it was then necessary to focus on another set of decisions. Which type of qualitative interviewing is most appropriate? Should I use a single method or several methods in combination? Should interviews be one-off or should there be a follow-up? My approach to managing these decisions was partly based on discussions with other researchers, and partly on an in-depth exploration of the literature which is summarised below. However, as we shall see later, it was a range of factors in combination, including my own experience, participants' preferences and other pragmatic factors, which were ultimately responsible for establishing particular protocols.

Some studies exploring young people's health related beliefs and behaviour have favoured individual interviews (Pavis et al, 1997, Rugkasa et al, 2001) while others have used focus groups (Gray et al, 1997, Albutt et al, 1995). Kitzinger advocates the use of individual interviews when the key purpose of the research is to tap into individual biographies or to understand the minutiae of decision making during intimate moments. Focus groups, on the other hand allow the researcher to examine how knowledge and ideas develop and operate within a given cultural context (Kitzinger, 1994). A potential limitation of focus groups, however, is that they are more likely to generate socially acceptable accounts (Bloor, 1997). Some research, conducted mainly with younger children has pioneered a relatively new approach. A recent study invited children aged 5 and 6 to talk with the researcher in pairs (Mayall, 2000). Choosing a friend to take part with them in order to offset the potentially inhibiting nature of the setting created a supportive social context which enabled the participants to engage fully in conversation. In this same study, paired interviews also facilitated an exploration of family settings, with a child and a parent taking part in the interview. In this way, these 'research conversations' offered insights into what children know and to some extent, how they learn. In another study on healthy eating with primary school children aged 5-9, the paired interview format provided a forum in which the young participants felt comfortable enough to quibble with each other, call each other names and argue over 'who knows best'. Mixed sex pairs were used, allowing for an exploration of gendered power relationships between children (Mauthner, 1997).

Other researchers have found that in smoking research with teenagers, small groups of three are 'ideal' (Michell & West, 1996). This study, investigating peer pressure to smoke, invited young people aged 12-14 recruited from a secondary school to form

their own small interview groups. Most opted for groups of three, although some participants chose a paired format. These small groupings differed from most focus groups both because of their size and because they consisted of self-selected friends which provided a 'natural' social network, although within the 'unnatural' context of an interview. An added ethical dimension to this study was the decision to allow participants a choice about how they wanted to take part, an approach that is gaining wider currency within young people's research (Edwards & Alldred, 1999). This approach potentially reduces the power differential between interviewer and interviewee, although care must be taken to ensure that all participants are able to make this choice freely.

Some researchers attempt to transcend the limitations of individual methods by combining qualitative methods. Using this approach, one recent study has shed new light on the impact of peer group structures on research outcomes (Michell & Amos, 1997, Michell, 1999). This study, conducted in schools, warns against the use of focus groups as the sole method of enquiry, showing that in some cases this method can disenfranchise young people perceived as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Only by conducting individual interviews alongside focus groups was this researcher able to gain access to the experience of young girls (but not young boys) at the bottom of the 'pecking order'. Low status girls were often silent in focus groups but communicative in interview. Low status boys, on the other hand, responded in one of two ways in both focus groups and interviews - they were either silent or monosyllabic or silly and disruptive in both settings. In this case, using complementary data generation techniques had the effect of compensating for the disadvantages of particular methods. It also enabled the researchers to approach their research questions from different angles and to explore these in a rounded and multi-faceted way. Other methodological critiques provide further empirical evidence of the benefits of using different qualitative methods, demonstrating that in some instances, using different qualitative methods generates different responses from the same participants (Backett & Alexander, 1991, Michell & West, 1996).

While using different methods in combination can be useful for illuminating different aspects of young people's lived experience, other researchers caution against mixing qualitative methods in a way that assumes a single social reality (Barbour, 1998). According to this argument, the assumption that each method will provide only a partial view of the phenomenon being studied is problematic because it implies that methods remain constant in their capacity to elicit data. This approach neglects other



aspects of context, including the researcher's understanding of the method and their skill in using it. This strategy of using a combination of methods to explore one set of research questions, often referred to as 'triangulation', also rests on an assumption that there is one objective, knowable social reality, a position which is inconsistent with a philosophical perspective which assumes that different methods and different sources of data are likely to produce different realities (Mason, 1996).

This discussion has highlighted the contested nature of qualitative research both in terms of its methods and its philosophical assumptions. The second part of the chapter will discuss how I attempted to resolve these issues. It will outline the methodological decisions I made in the design and conduct of the study and the basis for making them, and reflect upon how these decisions worked in practice. In recognition of the crucial role of ethics in the research process, this section begins with a discussion of my approach to managing the ethical dimensions of the study.

### **Managing the ethical dimensions of the research process**

As noted above, understanding young people's perspectives on cannabis and cigarettes requires a methodology that conceptualises and accepts young people as competent reporters of their own experience, capable of reflexivity. It requires the researcher to take their views seriously and to place these at the centre of the analysis. It also requires the research to be oriented in a way which works for young people rather than on them and its purpose of describing aspects of their social worlds must ultimately aim to influence social change (France, Bendelow & Williams, 2000). As already discussed, however, developing a method that is grounded in the views and experiences of young people is not without its challenges and ethical considerations; in particular, questions of consent and confidentiality may present significant dilemmas for the researcher. It seems appropriate, therefore, to consider these two issues in some depth.

### **What is meant by 'informed consent' and who should give it?**

The concept of 'consent' as a guiding principle has recently been broadened to encapsulate the notion of 'informed consent' (Alderson, 1995) in the light of research which has revealed a low level of comprehension of consent information, even in adults (Stanley et al, 1995). It is vital to ensure that young people fully understand not only the short term but also any long-term implications of their participation in research. Achieving this involves consulting participants at all stages of the work, allowing them opportunities to ask questions on more than one occasion and to



change their minds and refuse further involvement. This may sound straightforward, but the ethical impact will be severely limited unless the researcher employs a 'young person friendly' approach, for example, being careful to use appropriate language and concepts.

Other problems arise over access to research participants and over decisions about who should be consulted for consent. Access to young research participants is usually gained through adult gatekeepers and these intermediaries have the power to consent on behalf of young participants or, of equal significance, prevent young people from taking part (Hurley, 1998). A very real tension exists between the responsibilities of adults to protect and guide, on the one hand, and young people's rights to make autonomous decisions for themselves, on the other. No definitive resolution to this is to be found in Scots law since parental responsibilities to provide direction and guidance are balanced by the welfare principle (Children (Scotland) Act, 1995). The notion of consent is closely allied to questions of competence. There is an assumption in some research that all young people are vulnerable and lacking in competence. Clearly, a distinction needs to be made, for example, between very young, dependent children and teenagers. Nonetheless, such a view relies on the notion of a 'normal' interviewee who is adult, culturally integrated, articulate, knowledgeable and secure. Measured against this norm, all other interviewees are by definition, 'deviant' in some way. Researchers from this tradition may argue that while the overriding consideration is the young person's consent, consent from parents should also be gained (Hudson, 1996).

This position, however, does not resolve the difficulty of the young person who wants to participate but is refused permission by parents. In this instance, it is likely that the will of the parents will be respected (Butler & Williamson, 1994). Others argue that sound ethical practice in research with young people is best served by attending to context, situation and methodology rather than relying solely on the age of participants (Hurley, 1998). According to this perspective, the so-called 'normal' participant is but one type of interviewee amongst many, and research practice needs to be developed in ways that are sufficiently adaptable to suit the needs of a whole range of potential interviewees with a variety of characteristics. It seems reasonable to conclude that in most cases, young people are not only competent to participate in research, but are also able to consent to this process in an informed way so long as the researcher is sensitive and responsive to the contexts within which the research is taking place. It is also incumbent upon the researcher, however, to take seriously and

manage any concerns that gatekeepers may have, for example, by being clear that there are safeguards and guidelines in place to ensure that the young participants are being treated with respect and that they will not be harmed by the research. Finding an ethically robust way of managing issues relating to confidentiality and anonymity presents the researcher with a different set of problems.

### **What does confidentiality mean and how far should it extend?**

While there is general consensus that young people should be consulted about how data are to be collected and how confidentiality and anonymity are to be assured, difficulties surrounding issues of confidentiality often arise (France, Bendelow & Williams, 2000). A central issue is how the tension between protection and disclosure is interpreted and how this affects guarantees of confidentiality given by social researchers to their research participants. Some argue that because of child protection issues, young people should have no absolute right to confidentiality and that the adult researcher has a moral responsibility to 'protect' (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). A difficulty with this position is that 'risks' and 'dangers' remain ill-defined. Given the contested nature of these concepts and the tendency for adults to uncritically associate them with young people's drug use, this is a problematic position.

In Scots law, researchers are not obliged to pass on disclosures of illegal activity, such as cannabis use (Children (Scotland) Act, 1995). School-based drugs research projects have also established a precedent in protecting the confidentiality of disclosures about illegal drug use (Fast Forward/SAD, 1996). There is an argument that where breaches of confidentiality are deemed necessary, this should be done in full consultation with the young person (Alderson, 1995). A problem remains if the young person refuses permission for information to be passed on. Others attempt to resolve this dilemma by advocating a more absolutist position to the breaking of confidentiality, arguing that if trust and respect are to be gained, the researcher must protect confidentiality at all costs (Hudson, 1996). From this perspective, if a young person discloses something of concern, the researcher is obliged to negotiate and discuss possible action with the young person involved, but within the security of complete confidentiality (Butler & Williamson, 1994). This position is often attacked as morally indefensible on the grounds that it fails to acknowledge that there may be exceptional circumstances which override a young person's right to absolute confidentiality. Child protection issues in particular are now widely regarded as constituting such a situation, requiring researchers working in school settings, for

example, to place conditions on their pledge of confidentiality. Arguably, this position is only ethical if the researcher informs young people of this requirement prior to the research and supports and guides them in their decision making processes so that decisions about disclosure can be taken by young people themselves with full knowledge of the consequences.

This shift away from a position of absolute confidentiality in the case of physical and sexual abuse has encouraged some researchers to extend this to all situations where a young person is 'at risk' or 'in danger' (France, Bendelow & Williams, 2000).

According to this argument, being honest and truthful about why such issues are important and engaging young people in discussions which treat them as individuals with feelings, views and experiences to share and the ability to make decisions for themselves, actually reinforces the notion of the 'competent' child. As noted earlier, however, perceptions often differ about what constitutes 'risk' and 'danger'. In the context of adolescent drug use, where all illegal substances have tended to be presented as equally dangerous, the widespread use of these concepts in an uncritical way is clearly problematic. One way of addressing this might be for young people themselves to be involved with adults in defining what these terms mean in the context of particular research projects. In this way, disclosure of, say, smoking a cannabis joint can be clearly differentiated from disclosure of a life threatening situation such as a young person being forced against their will to inject heroin. Another position is that such ethical dilemmas are not unique to research with young people, and that an adult who discloses that they are contemplating suicide, or an elderly person who discloses that they are being abused by their carer, present the same ethical issues of protection and disclosure (Hurley, 1998). This argument has the merit of undermining the notion of young people as 'other', in special need of protection, whilst still acknowledging the dilemmas faced by researchers in balancing these concerns.

### **How do research settings influence ethical decision-making?**

The particular setting that researchers are working in will also have an impact on issues relating to consent and confidentiality. In schools, for example, it is standard practice to seek parental consent for young people's participation in research and the researcher may have no option but to accept the will of the parents. Paradoxically, once this consent has been given, it may be very difficult for young people to opt out if teachers give the impression that participation is compulsory. Before reaching this stage, of course, there are other levels of bureaucracy that have the power to



prevent access and veto young people's participation - education authorities, headteachers, guidance departments and individual class teachers may all have to be consulted and 'won over' at some stage. School settings also present significant practical problems in relation to confidentiality. 'Confidentiality' can mean different things to different people, and its meaning is largely taken for granted. Various features of the school culture may cause difficulty here - teachers may routinely assume 'in loco parentis' responsibility and their assumed 'right to know' may take precedence over young people's rights to confidentiality.

Doing research in informal settings is different in many respects from school-based research. Of particular significance, the research proposal itself does not generally have to be vetted by a formal ethics committee and it is therefore incumbent on the researcher to employ a rigorous approach to managing ethical issues. Another key differentiating feature of less formal settings is that contact with young people is founded upon voluntary affiliation - young people choose whether or not to attend a youth club, but they are legally obliged to attend school. These kinds of context therefore do not provide the researcher with a ready made clientele in quite the same way that schools do (Jeffs, 1991). Working in this setting presents unique challenges and opportunities for the researcher from both a practical and an ethical perspective (Fast Forward, 1994). In this context it is less likely that parents will be asked for their consent - although with 'sensitive' topics, they may be given details and informed that the research is taking place. Young people generally have greater autonomy and more influence on decision making processes in youth club settings than they do in schools. Pressure to conform to adult views is also less likely to influence young people's participation, and it is often easier to build up an atmosphere of trust. Paradoxically, from an ethical point of view, this may encourage young people to disclose information of concern to the researcher. A rigorous approach to confidentiality, appropriate to the setting and the young people within it, is therefore a necessary prerequisite. As with research in other settings, there may also be confusion over the roles of all those involved, and it is possible that youth workers may exercise a veto or fail to highlight the rights of young people to decline to participate. A desire on the part of workers to take part themselves may also unintentionally violate young people's 'space'.

Remaining sensitive to the rights and concerns of adult stakeholders whilst maximising the autonomy and safety of young research participants is clearly a difficult balancing act for researchers. It is also important to demystify the research



process and balance the power relationship between researchers and their participants, thus making the research enterprise more accessible and democratic. The next part of the chapter will describe what actually happened during the various stages of the research process and will include a consideration of how my ethical framework worked in practice.

### **Sensitising Pilot Work**

Prior to the pilot work beginning, I read widely and attended a course on ethical issues in social research in order to inform my thinking on the ethical and methodological dimensions of the research process. I also drew upon the key principles enshrined in various ethical codes, in particular, the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. However, while such advice provides a helpful framework, it does little to clarify what practice with young people should actually look like, nor does it highlight the potential dilemmas that researchers face in balancing the rights and responsibilities of all the stakeholders involved. I therefore initiated discussion of a wide range of ethical issues with supervisors and colleagues throughout the course of the project and managed ethical issues as they arose. I also met with a range of key informants who provided me with additional insights, both theoretical and methodological. The purpose of this sensitising work was to establish an approach to both the substantive and methodological aspects of the research, and if possible, to seek potential recruits for the main part of the study. I drew upon existing contacts, as well as new contacts referred by colleagues, to set up five group sessions, all in different community settings. In all cases, this involved a preliminary meeting with appropriate youth workers, and in most instances, I also visited each club prior to the group sessions in order to familiarise myself with the setting and to meet the young people who would be taking part. While time consuming, this approach proved to be effective in building up a relationship with participants.

The role of the youth worker, particularly in reminding young people about the session and accommodating it in a busy youth club programme, was also crucial to the success of this initial phase. These sessions set out to involve small groups of young people in participatory group work activities designed to encourage them to discuss their views on young people and cannabis (Kitzinger, 1994). They proved to be useful in two key respects. Firstly, they highlighted a number of themes which, in conjunction with ethnographic fieldnotes, informed the development of an initial topic guide. Secondly, they provided useful insights about the appropriateness of

different types of interview format. Although set up as a group activity, in practice, these sessions produced paired interview data as well as group data as a result of some participants not turning up on the night. The two paired interviews, in particular their interactive aspects, yielded richer, more insightful data than the larger group sessions, which also proved to be difficult to run. On the basis of this, together with empirical evidence noted earlier, I decided that the paired interview format, rather than conventional focus groups, offered the best opportunity of accessing more 'private' interactions between participants. A further practical benefit of using this method is its potential for facilitating the production of accurate and relatively complete transcriptions. I also noted that in the group setting, some participants seemed reluctant to play an active role and while it is impossible to be certain why this might have been, it is possible that the sensitive nature of the topic may have inhibited some young people. For this reason, I decided to include one-to-one interviews as an option in the main study as well as paired interviews. Offering young people a choice also represented a good 'fit' with my ethical framework.

### **Developing a topic guide**

I then developed and piloted a flexible, semi-structured topic guide which could be used both in a one-to-one setting and in a paired interview setting (Appendix 3). The topic guide aimed to generate data in five main areas - participants' views on where they live, accounts of how they spend their time, accounts of participants' beliefs and experiences of cigarette smoking, accounts of their beliefs and experiences of cannabis use, and finally, participants' beliefs about the links between cigarette smoking and cannabis. Generating data on contextual aspects would allow me to situate their cannabis and smoking accounts in the broader context of their lives. I also developed a brief questionnaire designed to gather background information about participants. This was based on the questionnaire used in a cross-national survey of the Health Behaviours of Scottish Schoolchildren (WHO, 1998) and aimed to circumvent some of the epistemological difficulties of using the Registrar General social class measurements as the sole method of categorising young people by socio-economic circumstances. This questionnaire developed proxy measures of young people's socio-economic status by asking questions about car ownership, holidays, bedroom occupancy, self-reported income and level of affluence and family structure. This questionnaire was used simply as a means of providing useful background information about the sample and was not analysed separately, although a brief discussion of these data is presented in a later section headed 'study

participants and settings'. A summarised table of sample characteristics drawn from the data collected in this questionnaire also appears in Appendix 1.

Drawing upon personal contacts, I set up three pilot interviews in two settings, chosen to reflect different socio-economic circumstances. Two of these were set up as paired interviews, one as an individual interview, but in practice, one paired interview and two individual interviews took place. Both the topic guide and the questionnaire were revised on the basis of these pilot interviews, although these revisions were relatively minor. In the case of the questionnaire, a few changes were made to aid comprehension. Additional questions aimed at accessing details of some of the broader contextual aspects of young people's lives were included in the topic guide. These questions related to participants' views of their local area and how they liked to spend their leisure time. Because the data generated from these pilot interviews corresponded closely with the research questions posed in the main study, I decided to include them in the analysis. As the major fieldwork phase progressed, I continued with this process of revision to reflect the recursive nature of the analytical process. For example, when early accounts highlighted the potential role of older siblings in supporting young people's cannabis use, I introduced a question designed to explore this theme further in subsequent interviews. I had anticipated that some participants may prefer to discuss the issues raised in the topic guide in a more abstract way and therefore produced several vignettes aimed at stimulating discussion. In practice, these were largely redundant, as it became clear that participants were willing and able to engage with the issues on the basis of their own personal experience.

At an early stage, I also introduced a stimulus exercise in the form of an 'agree-disagree' card game in order to shed light on one particular topic which was proving difficult to probe - participants' perceptions on the relationship between cannabis and cigarettes. As the fieldwork progressed and the analysis phase developed, it appeared that this topic was not particularly salient for these young people. Two types of response were common when I raised this in the context of the interview. Participants either found it difficult to respond or they expressed surprise that I was asking about it at all. From this latter perspective, it seemed that the link was obvious and was based upon participants' knowledge and experience of using cigarettes to roll cannabis joints. This line of questioning was not fruitful, however, in initiating discussion of how young people differentiated between these two behaviours or how each behaviour may influence their involvement in the other. For

this reason, I introduced the card game as a stimulus activity. This did achieve some success in accessing more detailed accounts of these issues, and these data were ultimately very useful in informing part of the analysis. On a cautionary note, however, in some cases, participants appeared to present apparently contradictory accounts during the interview itself, and in the context of the card game. On the face of it, this seems to add further weight to the idea that using different methods can generate different data from the same participants (Michell & West, 1996). However, for the most part, a closer reading of these apparent ambiguities revealed different strands and contributed to a richer, more multi-layered analysis. For example, these data helped me to reach a fuller understanding of young people's concepts of what constitutes being a 'cannabis user'.

### **Sampling**

I adopted a purposive sampling approach, reflecting the explicit link between theory and data generation (Mason, 1996). This strategy required me to engage jointly with data generation and data analysis in an ongoing recursive process. To begin with, I drew on my initial research questions to help me decide which data I needed to generate and this informed my sampling approach. I began coding my data at an early stage and as this process progressed and preliminary themes began to emerge, I focused my recruitment efforts on settings and participants which would help me to further develop my emerging ideas. For example, as a link between young people's use of cannabis and the way they spent their leisure time began to emerge, I searched for participants with different types of social lives. I was aware that the effectiveness of this approach would inevitably be circumscribed by the practical difficulties involved in recruiting research participants, particularly from informal settings. In practice, this did not prove to be a significant problem, although the sample is dominated by young people recruited from youth clubs. An additional limitation of the sample is that it includes few girls who are heavily involved in street-based leisure cultures and therefore does not allow for a rigorous exploration of possible gender differences in this aspect of young people's lives. A more diverse sample may have allowed this sort of analysis and may well have produced additional variations.

My decision to recruit primarily from youth club settings was based both on my previous career as a youth worker and on the basis of empirical evidence that demonstrates this approach to be effective in accessing young people's accounts and in promoting more active participation (Fast Forward, 1994, Hyde et al, 2000). Recruiting from these kinds of informal setting also allows access to stories



generated through the kinds of spontaneous interactions common in youth clubs (Green & Hart, 1998). In total, I recruited 32 boys and 27 girls to the study, from six different geographical locations, selected to reflect an urban/semi-rural mix and a range of socio-economic circumstances. I selected participants from the 13-15 age range on the basis that this appears to be the optimum time when young people begin experimenting with cannabis. I included participants with different patterns of use/non-use of cannabis and cigarettes in the sample in order to generate data which would allow comparisons to be made between different patterns of use in relation to both substances. In order to make the study more inclusive and to shed light on a hard to reach population, I also recruited a number of young boys (but not girls) from a different ethnic background. For cultural reasons, it was not possible to recruit girls from this population. I gained initial access to this community through a personal contact and then negotiated a complex and lengthy gatekeeping process, meeting several religious leaders at a local temple and attending other social events within the community. Just as the interviews were about to be conducted, however, I suffered a period of ill health and had to suspend work on the project for three months. On returning to work, I decided with some regret that it would not be practical to pursue this, and these interviews did not take place.

### **Gaining Access**

As noted earlier, while conforming to the broad sampling strategy outlined above, recruitment itself had to be flexible enough to reflect the reality of gaining access to youth clubs (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). I approached this challenge by developing a recruitment protocol which was able to accommodate different youth club contexts and different approaches to gatekeeping. Drawing upon lessons learned during the sensitising phase, this protocol was rooted in an acknowledgment of the key role that youth workers play not only in controlling access to potential participants but also in making youth club premises available to hold interviews. Youth workers also played an invaluable role in 'selling' the research to young people and in managing the time gap between participants agreeing to take part and the actual interview itself. I took great care to ensure, however, that youth workers fully respected young people's choices and did not try to 'help me out' by applying undue pressure on young people to take part. I enhanced my credibility by purposefully presenting myself as a former community worker, as well as a research student interested in finding out more about young people's lives. This placed me in a kind of intermediate position which helped me to transcend the limitations of both 'insider' and 'outsider' status. I was able to integrate my research expertise with an understanding and a commitment to youth

work values. This combination, together with a respectful and courteous style, played a key role in easing access. As a result, this process, although time-consuming, was highly productive and only in a few instances did gaining access fail to result in participants being recruited to the study.

### **Recruitment**

In explaining the research to young people themselves, I adopted a similar strategy, highlighting my past experience in youth work. Drawing on developing sociological perspectives on young people's research and reflecting my own ethical position, I also made it clear that I considered young people themselves as 'experts' on their own lives (Mayall, 1996, 1999, Morrow & Richards, 1996). I was aware that the age difference between myself and the participants may well create a credibility gap (Pollard, 1987). Overhearing one small group of boys during the recruitment phase refer to me as the 'hash wife', provided a useful reminder of this potential gap. However, drawing on recent research on youth values which reports that above all, young people value reciprocity, I modelled my behaviour on this ethic and for the most part, this seemed to work very well (Holland & Thomson, 1999).

As noted above, a flexible approach was essential for managing the diversity of youth club policies and styles. In some cases, I was invited by the youth worker to address the youth club participants as a group, in other less structured settings, it was necessary to 'hang out' for a while and then approach small friendship groups in an opportunistic way. Meeting with young people prior to interview was central to building up trust and in ensuring that potential participants knew what they were volunteering for. Potentially more problematic were issues relating to informed consent and confidentiality. In relation to informed consent, I took the view that it was ethically appropriate in these youth club contexts for young people in the 13-15 age range to make this decision for themselves. I made it clear that participants could change their mind about taking part at any time and that it was up to them how much or how little they wished to disclose. To support communication, I distributed a supplementary information sheet written in an informal style, including details of what would be involved in the research, how it would be used and how and when I could be contacted (Appendix 4). I also hoped that these sheets would help to bridge the time gap between the introductory session and the interviews themselves, although in practice, most of these were apparently discarded and the interventions of youth workers played a much more significant role in this. This approach to gaining informed consent was consistent with the existing policies of individual youth clubs

and while I did not seek parental permission for young people's participation, I ensured that a briefing sheet was available for any parents who might want to know about the research. One youth club had a policy of informing parents in writing that research was taking place but in all other cases, the decision whether or not to inform parents was left up to young people themselves.

As noted above, I also gave participants a choice about how they could participate - they could opt for a one-to-one interview or a paired interview with a friend of their choice. The paired interview format proved to be very popular and soon became established as the main method for generating data in this study as more and more young people opted to be interviewed in this way. Although it is impossible to eliminate the power differential inherent in research relationships, particularly those involving adult researchers and young participants, giving young people a choice about how they could take part in practice did appear to create a better balance in the relationship between myself and the participants. It was also interesting to note young people's preferences about how they would like to be interviewed. In most cases, these introductory sessions generated several volunteers and I negotiated the practical arrangements for the interviews with these volunteers there and then.

Wherever possible, I arranged the interviews to run alongside subsequent youth club sessions. In this way, I would be interviewing young people in their own territory and while this arrangement meant that they had to miss part of a youth club session, it maximised the chances of them turning up for interview and only proved to be a distraction on one occasion. In most instances, young people volunteered immediately to take part in an interview and participants themselves decided who they wanted to be interviewed with. On a few occasions, it was not possible to finalise arrangements on the same night as the briefing session and I had to liaise with the youth worker in order to set up the interviews. These introductory sessions did not always reap rewards, however. In one case, involving a drop-in youth club which was at a difficult stage in its development, the young people were difficult to engage and seemed to have no interest in the research. Without the active support of the youth worker in helping to 'sell' the project, it proved impossible to recruit any young people from this particular club. In another, I returned on two occasions to conduct interviews only to find that the youth club leaders had organised alternative activities outwith the youth club. These experiences highlight the importance of gaining the support of youth workers, not only in principle, but also in creating the conditions so that the interviews can actually take place. This has to be achieved,

though, in a way that does not compromise the ethical principle of young people making their own decisions about taking part in research. In order to guide the conduct of interviews in each setting and in order to provide a contextual framework for understanding data generated during the interviews, I took fieldnotes at these introductory meetings.

**Study participants and settings**

As noted earlier, a brief questionnaire adapted from the Health Behaviours of Scottish Schoolchildren Questionnaire (WHO, 1998) was used to collect background information about the sample. Participants’ responses to these questions were collated and are presented in Appendix 1. Although not useful for describing individual participants, this questionnaire provides a snapshot of the sample as a whole. The data presented in Appendix 1 reflect a relatively diverse sample, showing, for example, that while the majority of participants have their own bedroom, a substantial minority do not. Most participants live in families with two married parents, although a wide range of different types of family structure are also represented. Considering that more than half of the participants were drawn from interview settings which can be described as relatively deprived, it is interesting to note that only three people describe themselves as ‘not very well off’. In most cases, participants seemed to confer with their interview partner in completing the questionnaire, and it seems likely that there may be a stigma attached to labelling yourself in this way. Alternatively, perhaps young people use criteria other than material affluence to make sense of how well off they feel.

The fieldwork phase took place over a twelve month period, ending in the summer of 2001. The study was conducted mainly in the east of Scotland and roughly equal numbers of boys and girls took part:

**Table 1: Participants by gender**

Male	Female	Total
32	27	59

In order to explore young people's cannabis and tobacco related beliefs and behaviour during their early teenage years, recruitment efforts focused on young people aged between 13 and 15. Table 2 shows that the recruitment strategy was highly effective in attracting young people of this age to the study, with 88% of participants belonging to this age range at the time of interview:



**Table 2: Participants by age**

Age	Number of participants	%
12	3	5
13	19	32
14	17	29
15	16	27
16	4	7

In order to fully explore the role of cannabis in young people's lives, the sample included a wide range of different patterns of smoking and cannabis use/non-use. This range was achieved by monitoring participants' responses to a question during the interview about their current tobacco and cannabis use, although these types of data tell us little about the meanings and significance of these behaviours in young people's lives. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the meanings that young people attach to the category 'smoker', vary from person to person. However, collecting simple 'yes' or 'no' responses to these questions did help to keep track of the study's progress in recruiting young people with a range of smoking behaviours. Table 3 shows the reported smoking status of the participants at the time of interview:

**Table 3: Participants by reported current smoking status at time of interview**

Smoking behaviour	Number of participants	%
Cannabis & Cigarettes	21	35.5
Only Cannabis	3	5
Only Cigarettes	14	24
Neither	21	35.5

As noted earlier, most participants were interviewed in self-selected friendship pairs. The rationale underpinning the decision to focus on this particular method is explained more fully elsewhere in this chapter and in the appended published paper (Appendix 6). An additional aspect of the methodology involved offering young people themselves a choice about how they would like to be interviewed. They were presented with two choices - a one-to-one interview, or a paired interview with a friend of their choice. In practice, some of the participants were also interviewed in threesomes. Table 4 shows that paired interviews were the popular choice amongst young people themselves, and in this way, became established as the main method for generating data in this study:

**Table 4: Type of interview**

<b>Interview method</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>%</b>
Paired interview	21	70
One-to-one interview	5	17
Threesome	4	13

Most of the participants were recruited from youth club settings. Only two out of a total of thirty interviews, both conducted at the pilot stage but included in the analysis, took place in participants' own homes. Five settings were selected, trying to ensure an urban-rural mix and a range of socio-economic circumstances. A more detailed summary of the characteristics of each of these settings is included in Appendix 2. Table 5 provides a brief description and a breakdown of the number of interviews conducted in each of these settings:

**Table 5: Interview settings**

<b>Interview Setting</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Interviews (n=30)</b>	<b>Interviewees (n=59)</b>
Large, relatively deprived, inner city neighbourhood in the east of Scotland	N	10	20
Small, relatively affluent, semi-rural market town near Edinburgh	B	7	15
Small, relatively deprived coastal town near Edinburgh	R	5	10
Small, relatively affluent coastal town near Edinburgh	D	4	7
Large peripheral housing estate in Glasgow	T	2	3
Relatively affluent neighbourhood in central Edinburgh	M	2	4

### **Managing the Interviews**

As noted above, paired interviews were the popular choice with young people themselves and all but one of these interviews comprised same sex groupings. In most cases, two interviews with different participants, lasting an average of 40 minutes each, were held each session. Occasionally one participant out of a pair failed to turn up for interview and when this happened, I discussed with the remaining participants how best to manage the situation. On such occasions, they

either chose to form a threesome or to stick with one pair and replace the other paired interview with an individual interview. So, for the most part, the alternative one-to-one and threesome formats did not actually represent participants' first choice about how they wanted to be interviewed. This may help to explain why the threesomes tended to be dominated by two of the three participants with the other participant playing more of a passive role. There is one significant exception, however, where three young men insisted on being interviewed together. As this interview unfolded, these participants disclosed a shared experience of being violently bullied by an older lad. This experience appears to have created a strong friendship bond between them and as the interview progressed and they felt more at ease, accounts of the bullying began to spill out. It seems clear that their choice of being interviewed together was closely related to this experience and the strong bond it created. For the most part, participants appeared to appreciate being given a choice about how they wanted to be interviewed and this helped to establish a helpful rapport right from the outset.

Before starting each interview, I welcomed and thanked the participants for giving up their time, gave a brief summary of the research and why I was doing it, gave assurances of confidentiality and anonymity and asked their permission for the interviews to be tape recorded. My assurance of confidentiality was based on a belief that child protection issues were not likely to arise in the course of the interviews. I raised with participants my obligation under the child protection guidelines to act on any disclosures of abuse but explained that I would fully involve them in how this would be followed up. I also asked those participants taking part in a paired or small group interview to respect each other's confidentiality. I explained that it was permissible to discuss general issues arising from the interview but that disclosing what any individual had said in the course of the interview would amount to an infringement of confidentiality. All of the participants appeared to give their agreement to this request.

At this stage, I also emphasised that they could choose to withdraw at any time and that it was up to them how much or how little they wanted to contribute. I highlighted their role as 'experts' in their own lives and made it clear that my goal was to learn from them. Only in one instance, during the pilot phase, were participants initially suspicious of the tape recorder. I assured these two participants that no-one else would hear the tape but myself and they eventually gave their consent. On two occasions during this interview, adult workers came into the room - apparently not realising the room was being used. This caused great agitation

among the two girls being interviewed and may reflect the fact that they had just come from a 'bad behaviour' meeting with centre staff and were in an adversarial mood. This kind of interruption happened occasionally during the interviews, usually because workers needed to get something from the room we were using, but for the most part, participants were relaxed about it. During such interruptions, I made small-talk with the participants until the worker left and then tried to pick up where we had left off.

I began all of the interviews by asking a few general questions about where participants lived, how they felt about living there and how they spent their leisure time. This introductory phase served the dual purpose of putting participants at their ease and generating useful contextual data about aspects of their social lives. Even at this early stage in the interview, I attempted to probe what appeared to be taken for granted accounts, for example, participants' talk about 'being bored'. So when it appeared that participants' 'boredom discourse' was contradicted or problematised by data which suggested a varied social life, I asked participants to explain what they meant by being 'bored'. As the interview progressed, I began to explore participants' beliefs and experiences of cigarette smoking and cannabis use and the meanings they attach to these behaviours. While trying to ensure coverage of all my key topics, I also left space for participants to discuss other issues of salience to them, for example, their use of alcohol - an issue that was invariably introduced by participants themselves. The interviews were free-flowing, 'guided conversations' often deviating from the order set out in the topic guide (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). For the most part, I managed to keep track of questions that had been missed and rejected the idea of taking notes to help with this, on the basis that this could easily compromise my 'listening' role and appear off-putting to participants. I used a range of techniques aimed at stimulating responses and delving deeper into participants' understandings, including repeating participants' last few words and playing devil's advocate by framing questions using feedback from other interviews or evidence from other empirical work in this area. As noted earlier, towards the end of most of the later interviews, I introduced an 'agree-disagree' card game in order to generate data on how participants conceptualise the links between cigarettes and cannabis.

I ended all of the interviews by asking participants if they had any final points they wanted to make. This proved to be a useful device, eliciting new data in a number of interviews, for example about the role of popular role models in young people's cannabis use. These accounts were especially significant because they represented



issues that were of particular salience for participants themselves. I concluded the interview process by asking participants to fill in a short questionnaire. I also thanked participants again, and having carefully weighed up ethical and methodological arguments about paying research participants, I gave each person a modest gift token (Thompson, 1996, McKeganey, 2001). This small gratuity was given in recognition of young people's contribution and was not used as a 'carrot' to encourage participation, although since several interviews took place in most of the interview settings, word tended to get around. However, by this point, most participants had already been recruited to the study, so it is reasonable to conclude that in most cases, the gift token acted as a reward, and not as an inducement. Along with the gift token, I also gave each participant a sheet containing helpline numbers.

On all occasions, I made field-notes as soon as possible after each interview. These notes included details of my impressions of the interview, any unusual aspects, in particular, reflexive features relating to my relationship with the participants, as well as any broader contextual details which I thought might help to shed light on the interview data. This practice reflected my part in the data generation process and my role within it (Mason, 1996). The vast majority of the interviews went very well, lasting an average of 40 minutes. Two interviews were less successful than the others. In one case, the participants failed to turn up and two other girls, encouraged (but not coerced) by the youth worker, agreed to step in. As a result, I had not managed to meet the participants prior to the interview and hence had not begun to establish a relationship with them. The participants seemed reluctant to engage right from the outset and they had no apparent interest in the topics I was raising. This experience seems to highlight the importance of meeting with participants before any interview actually takes place, not only in terms of maximising the quality of the data generated, but also in terms of pursuing the ethical principal of informed consent. In the other case, also involving two girls, a subsequent discussion with the youth worker confirmed that the participants' non-engagement with the interview was typical of the way they handle social relationships. This latter case suggests that paired interviewing may not be appropriate for some types of peer relationship.

As noted earlier, this project also has a methodological focus. In particular, it aims to find out more about the use of friendship pairs in health related research with young people as an alternative to other forms of qualitative interviewing. Evidence from this study suggests that paired interviewing offers great potential in accessing accounts generated within close friendship bonds, making this method distinctive

from larger focus groups. In this study, paired interviewing facilitated access to interactions between participants, shedding light on many aspects of young people's social relationships and allowing occasional glimpses into more private territory. A detailed discussion based on these findings appears in a recently published methodological paper which advocates paired interviews as a distinctive approach to health research with young people (Appendix 6).

### **Analysing the Data**

As noted earlier, participants' accounts represented the main source of data in this study, although ethnographic fieldnotes taken at various stages during the fieldwork phase and information gleaned from preliminary meetings with youth workers who provided access to the various interview settings were also regarded as data. All of the interviews were fully transcribed, mostly by myself, and in this way, I became 'immersed' in the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). For the most part, interviews were transcribed verbatim, remaining true to the Scottish vernacular used by many participants. In most cases, it was relatively easy to distinguish between participants in the taped interview and to make out most of what was said. The typed transcripts therefore provided a relatively complete and highly accurate representation not only of what was said but also of how conversations developed in the course of the interviews. In order to anonymise both the interview settings and participants themselves, I devised a system of pseudonyms based on a system of using the same initial letter for all the participants in any one setting. This system had the advantage of providing an aide-memoire, reminding me which particular interview setting participants came from. A disadvantage of this system, however, was that it proved difficult in some cases to come up with sufficient names beginning with a particular letter and as a result, some of the pseudonyms lack authenticity in a contemporary Scottish context.

I approached the complex task of analysing the data by adopting a general 'grounded theory' approach whereby explanation and theory are fashioned directly from the emerging analysis (Mason, 1996). This approach is most closely associated with Glaser and Strauss who developed a very particular process for achieving this, known as 'constant comparison' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Drawing on elements of a 'subtle realist' perspective, I avoided a naïve application of this inductive approach by always considering my developing ideas as subject to possible future revision by new evidence (Hammersely, 1992). This perspective acknowledges that although we always perceive the world from a particular viewpoint, the world acts back on us to

constrain the points of view that are possible. Knowledge is always mediated by pre-existing ideas and values and yet some accounts are more plausible than others. A particular challenge for the subtle realist, then, is to produce plausible accounts and a detailed account of how I addressed this challenge is presented later in this chapter.

After each interview, I reviewed both my ethnographic fieldwork notes and the interview tapes and prepared a summary of each interview, drawing out preliminary themes. I began the process of 'constant comparison' by developing a list of cross-sectional indexing categories, reflecting what appeared to represent the most promising incidents in the data. For example, I noted that participants told 'stories' about cannabis and coded the interview transcripts accordingly. I was then able to compare all of the data extracts that had been grouped together under this code and begin to develop ideas about the properties of this category and how they interacted with one another. For example, which participants tell stories about cannabis? And what kinds of story do they tell? Since an additional aim of the study was to explore the use of the paired interview method, I also included categories which related to methodological, as well as theoretical aspects of the data.

In addition to writing summaries of each interview and devising preliminary indexing categories, I also annotated the transcripts themselves. At times during these early stages, I found it difficult to manage all of this analytical material, and the tasks involved sometimes felt repetitive, serving only to duplicate thinking that had already been done rather than synthesising and refining my analytical ideas. In retrospect, this early struggle probably reflected the complexity of the analytical process. It probably also reflected the limitations of relying too heavily on an intense process of coding and categorising, a criticism sometimes levelled at the grounded theory method (Coffey et al, 1996). These problems were possibly exacerbated by my inexperienced use of QSR's nVIVO computer software package. Since I had no experience of using this kind of software, I acquired a basic knowledge of how to use it by attending a one-day workshop and talking to colleagues who already had experience of using the package. I believed that this package would expedite the laborious task of managing the storage and retrieval of the large amounts of data generated in the course of the study. However, its code and retrieve logic did pose problems. In retrospect, I believe that in the early stages, it had a stultifying effect on my analytical thinking. As the data generation process progressed and it became more and more important to integrate the outcomes of this process with analytical developments, I began to rely more on my own in-depth familiarity with the

interview data acquired through numerous readings and re-readings of the transcripts. I was also aware of the dangers inherent in removing chunks of data from their context and therefore often chose to work directly from transcripts themselves. This ensured that I had a rich understanding of the broad contexts from which the data derived and facilitated the process of identifying similarities and differences between text passages grouped under the same code.

As this process progressed, I identified a broad analytical framework based upon the key social contexts that appeared to be relevant to young people's relationship(s) with cannabis - the family, peers, local neighbourhood and broader cultural contexts. Each of these contexts seemed to shape and be shaped by the lives of the young people in the study and discussion of these contexts suffused their accounts. Another recent study on young people's health related behaviour also drew upon these contexts and this work was influential in developing my thinking at this stage (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). Drawing too heavily on the analytical logic of this study, I initially 'saw' these contexts as 'levels of influence', an explanation which did not fit with my own data nor with my own philosophical position. Through further readings of the transcripts, I moved on from this analytical cul-de-sac and developed an alternative way of understanding how these contexts relate to aspects of young people's lives, in particular their health-related beliefs and behaviour. This experience highlights how difficult it is, particularly for new researchers, to integrate understandings based on existing empirical evidence with developing theories grounded in their own data and other literature to produce coherent, convincing explanations. My own approach was one of iteration, where previous work and existing theories and concepts interact with the interpretive process involved in data analysis.

Once this framework was established it became easier to identify more theoretically developed analytical themes both within and between these contexts. As explanations began to develop, I approached this task of theory construction by searching for negative instances, seeking to understand differences (Denzin, 1989). For example, when it began to emerge that street-based leisure seemed to play a particular role in young people's cannabis use, drawing on the logic of my sampling strategy, I began to look for cases of young people who use cannabis but who spend their leisure time in other ways. This enabled me to refine my developing theory of the role of street life in young people's cannabis use, producing a more holistic,



although not universal, account of the multi-layered dynamics of this particular social context (Bloor, 1978, Hammersely, 1995).

At an early stage, I rejected positivist versions of the strategy of triangulation as a way of enhancing the validity of my methods and developing explanations since these rely on a belief in one objective, knowable social reality that can be 'converged upon' through the use of multiple sources (Blaikie, 1991). However, I accepted that processes of triangulation can serve purposes other than the validation of one account, and may help to deepen understanding of different aspects of an issue (Silverman, 1993, Dingwall, 1997). Drawing on these post-positivist perspectives, I have, to a certain extent, used the logic of triangulation to approach my research questions from different angles and to explore these in a rounded and multi-faceted way.

I have also rejected the use of 'member validation' as a strategy for enhancing the validity of my emerging theories. The assumption underlying this strategy is that research participants are in a position to judge, confirm or challenge the validity of the researcher's interpretations. However, it is naïve to assume research participants will be familiar with the kind of social science interpretations employed by researchers in this field. It is also problematic to assume that any one perspective, including the researcher's, has epistemological privilege simply by virtue of belonging to a specific group or occupying a specific social location (Mason, 1996). However, this is not to say that it is never appropriate to share research findings with participants. On the contrary, appropriate dissemination is both ethically sound and essential for enhancing the links between research, policy and practice. For this reason, I intend to distribute a 'young person friendly' newsletter outlining the main findings of the study to the research participants in due course (Appendix 5).

Drawing upon the concept of 'theoretical saturation', I stopped sampling after conducting 30 interviews. At this stage, my developing explanations had become 'saturated' and I was reasonably certain that additional fieldwork was unlikely to generate additional data. The following five chapters present my interpretation of the data generated from these 30 interviews. As noted earlier, my interpretation also draws upon additional contextual data, mostly ethnographic fieldnotes. My analysis is organised around the four contexts noted above and includes an additional chapter exploring the links between cannabis and cigarettes, one of the key aims of the study. We know little about the role of cannabis in young people's lives and a

comprehensive understanding of this is only possible by considering the accounts of young people with a range of patterns of use and non-use of cannabis. A wide range of perspectives, encompassing non-users, opportunistic users and those users who may be described as 'cannabis-oriented', are therefore included to inform the analysis. Using a technique of 'thick description', I have explored and described my data in a way that engages with cultural meanings (Geertz, 1993). In this way, I have attempted to provide readers with a vicarious experience of 'being there' during the interviews so that they can judge for themselves the likelihood of the same kinds of social processes applying to other settings.

### **Selecting data extracts**

In common with all qualitative research, I used quotations from interviews illustratively in an analytical context (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, Mason, 1996). In most cases, data extracts go beyond simple illustration to develop analytical points. By virtue of the paired interview format, many of the extracts are fairly lengthy, often involving an interchange between interview participants and interviewer. In this way, the extracts provide a strong sense of the interview itself and the interviewer's role within it, making it possible to develop the analysis in a way that encompasses themes and the participants themselves. In some cases, extracts refer specifically to a unique set of circumstances, in others they are illustrative of a larger constituency of young people. Care is taken throughout the whole analysis, however, to avoid making claims that are not supported by, or go beyond, the data.

### **Labelling data extracts**

As noted earlier, the study analysis is presented in Chapters 4-8. The analysis is supported by extracts from the interview data. In order to preserve the anonymity of both interviewees and interview settings, interviewees have been given a pseudonym beginning with a letter which corresponds with a particular interview setting. This coding system, together with a description of each interview setting, is presented in Table 5 (Page 52) and Appendix 2. Each data extract is labelled with the interviewee(s) pseudonym(s) and age. Thus, interviewees Bridget and Bruce were both interviewed in interview setting B while Rose and Rob were both interviewed in interview setting R. The abbreviation 'Int' refers to the interviewer, in all cases, myself.

The first data chapter focuses on the family context and its significance in relation to young people's risk behaviours. Amongst other themes, this chapter explores how older siblings play a role in passing on lay knowledge about cannabis and how participants talk about their parents' responses to 'knowledge' of their cannabis use. This chapter also includes a discussion of the views of non cannabis users on their perceptions of adult beliefs and potential responses to young people's cannabis use. The next chapter discusses peer contexts, revealing some of the social purposes that appear to characterise young people's use of cannabis, in particular, associating this with predominantly male, street-based leisure. It contrasts this with how non cannabis users describe their leisure time and includes a brief discussion of reported avoidance strategies. The third data chapter explores factors operating at a local neighbourhood level and develops an analysis of how aspects of young people's local environment may help to shape their health related choices and behaviours. The next chapter attempts to locate young people's cannabis use in a broader context, exploring participants' views on current debates surrounding cannabis and how they talk about the significance of aspects of popular culture on young people's cannabis use. The final data chapter explores the relationship between young people's cannabis and tobacco use, revealing apparent ambiguities in participants' perceptions of concepts like 'addiction' and 'harmfulness'. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which cannabis appears to support and sustain young people's cigarette smoking. These analysis chapters are followed by a final discussion chapter which reflects further upon the findings and spells out their significance both from a theoretical and a methodological perspective. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for health promotion policy and practice.

**Introduction**

As noted in the Introduction, this study has developed an analytical framework which allows for an exploration of broader contextual factors. The purpose of this is to help us to more fully understand the role of cannabis in young people's lives. Despite the emphasis on the development of peer group influences among young people in the 13-15 age range, families remain of profound importance, not least in helping to shape health beliefs and behaviours (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). In order to explore aspects of this relationship, this initial data chapter will focus on the family context. This will build on the existing literature which has focused on family responses to smoking and alcohol, as well as the wider literature on parenting.

The current study did not explicitly set out to gain insights into young people's perceptions of the role of family in helping to shape young people's beliefs and cannabis use behaviour. However, the topic guide did include a question which invited participants to discuss one particular aspect of their family relationships. This question aimed to generate data about young people's views on the role of family in policing and controlling their cannabis use. As we shall see, young people appeared to relish the opportunity to discuss this topic, often using colourful and colloquial language to illustrate their accounts. As the study progressed, participants often volunteered information relating to the role of various family members, particularly in relation to their cannabis related beliefs and behaviour, and this emergent data is included in the analysis. The paired interview format worked well in encouraging and facilitating participants to discuss this aspect of their experience, although the subject matter itself also appeared to be intrinsically interesting to the young people in the study, particularly the cannabis users. Drawing on extracts from these accounts, the discussion that follows focuses on cannabis, although some data relating to participants' perceptions of parents' attitudes and responses to their drinking are included in order to highlight what seems to be an important distinction between these two substances. The chapter also includes a discussion of the perspectives of non-cannabis users. It concludes with an exploration of the role of older siblings both as potential participants in the parenting process and as influential agents in shaping young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour.



### What constitutes 'knowing'?

One key theme emerged in the accounts of those young people who reported personal experience of using cannabis, in response to the question about how they thought their parents may react to 'knowledge' of their cannabis use. Participants' accounts of their parents 'knowing' about and responding to their cannabis use suggest that this is a highly problematic scenario characterised by ambiguity and contradiction. For example, participants' accounts suggest that ambiguity is a central feature of 'knowing' - and one which problematises the issue of responding:

- Int** Right, and do, like, your parents or that know that you smoke (cannabis), or?
- Robert (14)** I keep it hidden, I've been caught before
- Int** You've been caught, right?
- Rose (15)** My ma kind of kens, but I'm no' going to admit it to her, my sister kens and my big brother kens - it's just basically my mum that's kind of catching on.
- Int** What do you think your folks would think if they knew you were
- Robert** Kill me
- Rose** I dinnae really ken about my mum - she's too hard to tell. Probably, aye, 'cause it's a drug, but then again, my big brother used to dae it but I dinnae think my mum kent about that, so I dinnae ken

While Rose's two siblings appear to know about her cannabis use, she seems to describe her mother's 'knowing' about it as a developing process of awareness. Until this process has reached its conclusion, her mother is unlikely to take any action. It is far from clear, however, if Rose actually feels that it is only a matter of time before her behaviour is 'discovered' by her mother. It seems more likely that her comments suggest different levels of knowing. While certain clues or signs may be there, unless Rose actually admits it, ambiguity is an enduring feature of this scenario and this ambiguity ensures that no action is likely to be taken. Rose's later comment about her brother's cannabis use seems to support this latter interpretation. This additional information about Rose's family also highlights how the contexts of parenting may be different for different families. Not all families will have older cannabis using siblings and it seems likely that this sort of variation will also play a role in influencing how parents 'know'. This extract also draws attention to two additional dimensions of this theme of ambiguity - 'getting caught' and the tendency for participants to use exaggerated language in this context - both of which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Another extract, this time referring to a participant's account of his ecstasy use,

provides a useful example of the gulf between observable symptoms of possible drug use, on the one hand, and concrete, realisable evidence, on the other:

**Bret (15)**      There was one day - well, I think it was my first time on an e (ecstasy) and I woke up the next morning wi' my eyes still oot my face, and it's like, what's wrong wi' you and I'm like, nothing. 'Cause, like mean I still get that, I wake up in the morning and my pupils are still huge, ken. But I mean I just say, naw, I was oot drinking last night

Here, Bret tries to conceal his more 'serious' ecstasy use by passing off his symptoms as hang-over induced. By volunteering a 'confession' relating to a risk behaviour considered less serious by many parents, Bret manages simultaneously to both remove and maintain ambiguity. Although his confession of heavy drinking may contain an element of damage limitation, he appears to imply that his parents would not be unduly concerned about his alcohol use and that he would escape sanction in spite of their certain knowledge of this. Because large pupils can both be a sign of heavy drinking and various other forms of drug use, however, Bret also manages to maintain ambiguity and deflect attention from his ecstasy use. In this way, even hard evidence can be open to ambiguous interpretation. This extract suggests that parents may respond in different ways to 'knowledge' of their offspring's substance use depending on the substance. In particular, it may be that young people's drinking (within certain limits) is managed in quite a different way by some parents. As we shall see later in this chapter, this may be a deliberate strategy (apparently unsuccessful in this particular instance) aimed at protecting young people from exposure to other, more serious risk behaviours.

### **'Knowing' and 'Getting Caught'**

These first two extracts suggest that so far as young people's risk behaviours are concerned, ambiguity is considered a central feature of parents' 'knowing'. In the face of this ambiguity and uncertainty, it would appear that parents are reluctant to take action. According to many participants in this study, however, this ambiguity ends when someone 'gets caught':

**Int**              So what do you reckon your folks would make of it if they knew you were smoking hash?

**Nils (14)**      Kill me

**Nicol (15)**     My dad would kill me, well my dad kens, but like, if he caught me

Nicol's account seems to suggest that his father ignores his cannabis use so long as it remains discreet and he does not actually catch him, although it is not clear precisely

what 'getting caught' means. What is clear from this account, however, is that 'getting caught' is distinctly different from 'knowing', at least in terms of the response Nicol believes this may invoke. While the language he uses to describe his father's reaction is exaggerated, it clearly applies only to knowledge that is certain and realised through the act of 'getting caught' - other levels and types of knowing appear to be immune from this kind of response.

In another extract, a participant contrasts his father's reaction to finding out about his cigarette smoking, on the one hand, and his cannabis use, on the other:

**Ben (15)** My dad found out 'cause he seen a rockie bundle all over my jacket an' that, fae joints an' that. Wi' fags my dad started on me but wi' hash he just like, gave me a row, naw he never, he just laughed actually, he just said "rocket man" so I said, "aye" and he goes, as long as I dinnae catch you. 'Cause he probably used to dae it when he was young as well. He caught me wi' fags and he went mental

In its portrayal of a more liberal parental approach to knowledge of a young person's cannabis use compared with their cigarette use, this extract seems to confound usual expectations. It also adds further weight to the idea that 'getting caught' is somehow different from any other form of knowledge. Liberal approach or not, it would appear that 'getting caught' using cannabis is likely to trigger a response, while finding 'rockie-bundles' (burn marks caused by ash from a cannabis joint) is not. Another interesting feature of Ben's account is his apparent assumption that his father's experience with cannabis was confined to youthful experimentation. This seems to suggest that he views cannabis as predominantly a youthful activity, not something that people carry on into adult life, a view expressed by other participants in this study.

An additional extract from Ben's account also seems to suggest that his father's approach to his cigarette smoking is actually very similar to his attitude to his cannabis use:

**Int** What about you, Ben, what would your parents make of it?  
**Ben (15)** My dad turned round and says, I'm a wee bit angry, and he says I'm no' bothered if you smoke but as long as I dinnae catch you  
**Int** Right  
**Ben** And my mum and dad are separated and my mum's no' bothered, and my big brother, she just lets him smoke in front of her  
**Int** Uhu

**Ben** My dad doesn't let me smoke in front of him though

As with Ben's cannabis use, it would seem that it's not so much the smoking itself that is a problem for his father, as the 'getting caught'. Ben's account also draws an interesting distinction between the reaction of his separated parents to his own and his older brother's smoking. Linking aspects of both family structure and process, Ben reports that a different set of rules are apparently applied by his mother in the case of his older brother's smoking. This may reflect a difference in parenting attitude and styles between his mother and his father, or it may reflect a recognition of the age difference between the two sons.

So far, none of the extracts have been explicit about what 'getting caught' actually involves. A common-sense assumption might be that this means being caught in the act. However, another participant's account suggests that in some instances, a less certain form of evidence may satisfy the criteria for 'getting caught':

**Neville (13)** I've gouched once (got really stoned), and that's about it and that's when I had been smoking fae like half eight to like, half eleven, non-stop and I got caught that day tae, man, my dad knew the minute I walked in - I was stokin' it (scared)

Unlike Bret's earlier account, in this case, it would appear that the signs of Neville's heavy cannabis session were unmistakable to his father so it was impossible to pass them off as anything else. So it would appear that the meaning and impact of 'getting caught' may vary from family to family, and one significant reason for such variations is the degree of familiarity parents have with particular substances and their effects. Neville does not go on to say what actually happened but he appears to be scared of his father's reaction and another extract from his account seems to imply a potentially violent response:

**Neville (13)** I had an argument with my ma aboot letting me smoke and then she just didnae say anything 'cause she kent I was just going tae dae it behind her back anyway

**Int** What would your ma say about you if she thought you were smoking hash?

**Neville** My ma wouldnae say nout 'cause she would just get telt to shut up but my old man would burst me, kill me like

**Int** Would he?

**Nick (14)** I dinnae ken what my mum would do - she'd go mad, though, she'd hit me



**Neville**      My ma wouldnae hit me 'cause she kens that my old man - that's his job. She'd just get telt to shut up, anyway

As noted earlier, many participants appear to use exaggerated language to describe how they believe parents would respond to knowledge of their cannabis use. It seems reasonable to assume that when participants use expressions like, 'I'd be dead', 'my mum would take a schitz' and 'I'd get murdered', they do not actually mean this literally. However, it would be misleading to assume that physical violence is never part of the repertoire of parental responses to their offspring's cannabis use. Both Nick's and Neville's accounts of getting 'hit' seem to ring true and are consistent with other comments about how they themselves claim to dispense discipline to younger siblings who break the rules.

It may be that young people's use of this kind of language partly reflects a major public discourse which portrays all (illegal) drugs as intrinsically bad and evil. Viewed in this way, it becomes easier to understand young people's use of these expressions since from this perspective, they appear to reflect the only appropriate response to such a 'public menace'. However, this discourse is not one of violent reaction, and it may simply be that young people's use of exaggerated language in this context serves to embellish and make more interesting their account of this potential confrontation with their parents. In the absence of accounts from parents themselves, it is impossible to be certain how they would react but it seems likely that in most situations, parents will adopt a range of non-violent strategies to try to manage their children's risk behaviours. The gulf between what young people say is likely to happen when they get caught compared with what actually happens, may reflect an acknowledgement of the tightrope that parents have to walk between managing support and control family functions on the one hand, and playing the role of responsible neighbours and citizens, on the other.

It may be that some parents find this balance more difficult to strike than others, although as noted above, without parents' own accounts, this can only be regarded as a speculative observation. Cannabis is clearly something that some parents, but not others, were reported as having personal experience of and as we have already seen, this factor can play a significant role both in defining what 'being caught' means and in the kind of response this may trigger. The following extract highlights some of the difficulties that may be faced by parents who have themselves smoked cannabis

in the past (or who continue to do so) but who also wish to manage their offspring's behaviour in an appropriate way:

- Int** So what would your family make of it if they knew you were smoking hash?
- Nathan (13)** I'd get murdered
- Int** Would you?
- Nathan** Aye
- Neal (14)** My mum drops hints aboot it, like, she can tell, 'cause sometimes when I've went in my eyes have been quite blurry. And I've been caught with a rolling mat, fags, skins, lighters. There's my rolling mat there (takes small bamboo mat out of his pocket and shows it to me). Handy wee thing
- Int** So that's a rolling mat, is it?
- Neal** Aye, she drops hints, like, she says, I know you dae it but there's nothing I can dae to really stop you 'cause I'm gonnae stop you but you're still gonnae dae it when I dinnae ken. She doesnae allow it, she says I dinnae like you daein it and I widnae like to catch you, but she's told me to watch my clothes for hot rocks

Neal's description of his mother's response to knowledge of his cannabis use captures ambiguity very well. According to Neal, his mother both 'drops hints' but also in some respects voices her disapproval in an overt and explicit way. The way he describes it, his mother both 'accepts' his cannabis use in the sense that she acknowledges that she feels powerless to prevent it, but on the other hand, she also takes a clear stand on the issue. Neal's reference to his mother's apparent concern about potential damage to his clothes as a result of his cannabis use also further problematises how Neal may make sense of this seemingly ambiguous response. It could be that her concern over his clothes is an alternative strategy for trying to control his cannabis use. She may be attempting to appeal to his sense of responsibility. Counselling him to try and avoid damaging his clothes may be a way of encouraging him to take personal responsibility in relation to a part of his identity which is likely to be of some significance to him at this stage in his life. However, an alternative explanation seems more likely. Neal may believe that his mother is giving him the benefit of her own experience and is actually 'sharing' knowledge about cannabis while letting him know that she will be picking up on a range of signs. Her comments could also be read as a sign that she does not really want to know about Neal's cannabis use but that burn marks would make it difficult for her to ignore this.

### **'Knowing' and 'getting caught' - understanding the distinction**

Young people in this study seemed to talk about different ways and different levels of 'knowing' in relation to parents' 'knowledge' about their actual or potential use of cannabis. According to these perspectives, 'getting caught' occupies a distinctive status from other types of knowing which, in contrast, are characterised by ambiguity. It may be that this construction of 'knowing', with its built-in ambiguity, allows some young people to continue to engage in their cannabis use until they actually get caught since it is only at this point that 'knowing' becomes certain and realised. Precisely where and how this point is reached, however, appears to vary from family to family, at least from the perspectives of the young people in this study. For some parents, it would appear that only the act of witnessing their children engaging in risk behaviours leaves no room for ambiguity and this is the only scenario which is likely to trigger a robust response. From this perspective, it would appear that ambiguous situations invite an ambiguous response from parents while conversely, the transparency of actually being caught in the act attracts a clear-cut, unambiguous, albeit unspecified response.

However, for other parents, the point at which 'knowledge' becomes certain and realised may be different. Parents who themselves have personal experience of cannabis may arrive at this point on the basis of evidence which falls short of actually catching their children in the act. Their ability to do this, however, is likely to result in exposure of their own experience with cannabis. This may place such parents in an even more ambiguous situation and present them with particular difficulties in managing their children's risk behaviours. Some participants gave the impression, for example, that parents in this situation are powerless to prevent their children's cannabis use. Other participants, however, seemed to highlight the fact that parents face stiff competition from other potential sources and levels of influence, in particular, from their children's peer networks and other aspects of young people's social worlds. Many accounts also, of course, highlighted the impact of young people's own agency in shaping their beliefs and cannabis use behaviour. Taken together, however, these accounts suggest that ambiguity and powerlessness are best understood not as separate and distinct themes, but as complementary elements in this kind of situation, at least so far as cannabis users are concerned.

### **Young people's perspectives on parents' responses to their drinking**

Accounts from earlier in this chapter suggest that parents reportedly do not confront their children's cannabis use so long as their knowledge of it is uncertain and

ambiguous. In this way, even apparently hard evidence is open to ambiguous interpretation and it is possible to both 'know' and 'not know' about their children's involvement in this behaviour. Conversely, according to the participants in this study, parents are likely to impose strict sanctions when the evidence is undeniable and realised, although there are also variations in where parents draw this particular line. This section will argue that with drinking, parents appear to adopt quite a different approach. Data will be presented which show parents for the most part engaging in what appears to be a harm reduction strategy. In contrast with the earlier section, this part of the analysis draws upon accounts from the whole study sample - it does not confine itself to the accounts of cannabis users.

This apparent harm reduction approach is consistent with findings reported in another recent study and seems to be aimed at protecting young people from exposure to other, more serious risk behaviours (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). This strategy involves parents in negotiating and jointly managing with their children, their involvement with and exposure to alcohol. As a result, both 'knowing' and 'getting caught' are not an issue since young people's drinking is accepted as a given and is the starting point for negotiation. This appears to set it apart from young people's views about parental responses to their cannabis use. However, there is one dimension that both risk behaviours appear to share - concerns about the potential consequences of drinking and cannabis use, in particular the potential for involvement in these behaviours to lead to trouble with the police. As we shall see, though, while it appears from participants' accounts that it is parents who are concerned with the potential criminalising effects of their children's drinking, with cannabis, some young people themselves appear to be concerned with this risk.

As noted above, many participants in this study appeared to suggest that their parents adopt a tolerant approach to their drinking in order to try to limit their exposure to other, more serious risk behaviours. However, without exception, certain limits were imposed or negotiated:

- |                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Int</b>         | So, do you think parents regard cannabis as more dangerous than things like alcohol, or                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Brenda (14)</b> | I think parents are against alcohol, and like smoking and cannabis, and, like, drugs, the whole lot - they're like totally against it                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Bex (14)</b>    | But like, they don't mind us drinking, like, when they're around. My mum doesn't mind me drinking, like, she says to a certain extent, she doesn't mind me like, when I've got friends over to stay, like, she'll let us have a drink or something, like, she'll make sure we don't, like, |



- drink, like, half the cupboard, hopefully. We've got a cupboard full of drink
- Brenda** And my mum prefers me to drink, like, when she's there - and my dad. But she doesn't want me to drink at a disco, or anything because anything could happen
- Int** Right
- Brenda** And you don't know what you're going to do 'cause if you're drunk, then you might lose control of yourself

In this extract, the parents of these participants apparently impose limits on how much their daughters drink. But perhaps of more significance, they try to ensure that alcohol is consumed under their direct supervision. In this way, they can monitor how much is drunk and avoid the potential consequences of excessive drinking. So, having a few drinks at home is acceptable, while drinking at the youth club disco is not. This approach also provides parents with an opportunity to teach their children the skills and values associated with (adult) social drinking. Some parents are apparently happy to share this monitoring task with other parents, for example, in the context of a party at a friend's house:

- Damien (15)** Aye my mum's a' right like. If I was at a party she's like sound. She gets it for me. She gets me bevy, but not like every Friday, ken what I mean? Like once a month or something. And then she's like, if I try to get, like, Strongbow, she's like, no, I cannae get this. Well she feels like that, eh, so I went, do I get a litre of cider then? And she's like aye. She brings me Woodpecker, 3.5%. I'm like, right, thank you. And then my mum knows if she doesn't get me it I'll just go down the street and get somebody else to get me it if I can, like. So it's no' like if she can't get it, if she doesn't get me that it doesn't mean I cannae go and get it, so

Again, parental monitoring appears to be a way of avoiding the potential anti-social consequences of excessive drinking. According to Damien, his mother attempts to reduce these risks by buying him a less potent version of his preferred drink. Although not clear if his friends' parents are present at the party, it may also be that she relies to some extent on these parents to carry out the supervision function. This is consistent with findings from a recent study on parental monitoring which has found that many parents rely on the support of other 'trusted' families with similar values to monitor their children's behaviour (Seaman, 2002). This extract also implies, however, that there may be variations in how parents define acceptable levels of drinking and in how they try to protect their children from other, more serious risk behaviours. Another extract clearly illustrates this point:

**Int** Do you think they think that drinking's better for you or worse, or  
**Rose (15)** Naw, no' if it's just a drink well, it's no' just mine, well she says, like, if I'm going out at the week-ends or that, she'll say - if you're gonnae be drinking, dinnae drink spirits or if you're gonnae drink spirits, dinnae drink them straight. But I try an' no' go in steaming, but my mum catches on sometimes that I'm drunk 'cause I go in, ye ken, falling all over the place an' that and she just doesnae say nothing - I think she prefers that, ken, to going aboot, getting lifted an' that by the police

Here, Rose's mother seems to define 'acceptable' drinking in broader terms than parents in previous extracts, both in terms of where and how much is consumed. In this instance, she appears to be balancing the risks of possible drunkenness with the risks of her daughter getting into trouble with the police. According to participants in this study, the risk of involvement with the police as a result of unsupervised excessive drinking is the key concern of parents:

**Int** So what do your parents think about your drinking then?  
**Darren (15)** My mum knows but she doesn't say anything. And my dad knows but they don't say anything. I think it's just because they've not had the police at their door yet, 'cause they know I'm too smart to get caught and that. But my mum said to me the last time if the police come to the door you're dead now for it. Just don't let them come to the door

These extracts seem to suggest that parents regard unwelcome attention from the police as stigmatising and see this as more serious than other potential consequences that may arise from their children's excessive drinking. As noted earlier, it is around this issue of police attention that the risks associated with cannabis and alcohol appear to coincide. However, while in the case of alcohol it is parents who are reportedly concerned about this issue, with cannabis, some young people reported that they themselves were concerned. There were considerable variations, however, in how the risks associated with criminalisation were perceived by these participants and in how these beliefs may have affected their behaviour. Some expressed concerns that being caught using cannabis by the police may result in large numbers of otherwise law-abiding young people becoming criminalised. According to these participants, those who used cannabis on a regular basis may face the additional risk of engaging in petty crime as a way of financing their cannabis use. In terms of their own lives, they worried that getting caught using cannabis may cause future difficulties in relation to gaining access to university and getting a job. Some were also worried about the potential reaction of parents.

However, there were variations in how these beliefs appeared to shape young people's behaviour. For some, the risks involved appeared to act as a deterrent, although it cannot be assumed that this would always remain the case. Others talked about using cannabis occasionally but only in very specific circumstances, or to put in another way, only in the 'right' social context - for example chilling out at home after the youth club disco with a small group of close friends. For these young people, their experience of using cannabis in this way appeared to contradict official messages about the potential harmfulness of cannabis and they generally considered it to be 'no big deal'. Other participants, while believing the criminalising potential of cannabis to be unfair and inappropriate, expressed alternative views in relation to the risks this might pose for young people. These participants, mostly boys who spent most of their leisure time hanging about the streets, far from being concerned about any negative consequences, seemed to derive a range of social benefits from their involvement with cannabis, a finding consistent with a recent ethnographic study of male youth street culture (Pavis & Cunningham-Burley, 1999). This close association between cannabis and street based leisure cultures will be explored in greater detail in a later chapter.

This section has shown how participants' overwhelmingly describe their parents as adopting a harm minimisation approach to their drinking, usually involving some form of monitoring process which is jointly negotiated. This strategy apparently aims to protect children from exposure to more serious risk behaviours. This is in stark contrast with how participants described their parents' potential response to 'knowledge' of their cannabis use. Where the two behaviours coincide is in their potential for attracting attention from the police, although for some young people, this attention can sometimes have a positive as well as a negative effect. With alcohol, the police are only likely to get involved if young people drink to excess in public spaces and this perhaps helps to explain why parents are keen to monitor their children's behaviour and teach them to drink responsibly. With cannabis, on the other hand, young people risk a criminal record simply for possessing cannabis, although this situation is set to change in 2003. This is widely perceived by young people as unfair and out of proportion with the relative harmfulness of cannabis. It remains to be seen how the decision to reclassify cannabis may impact upon young people's cannabis use.

### **Non-cannabis users' perspectives on adult' beliefs about cannabis**

As well as asking those participants who reported being current cannabis users how their parents may react to knowledge of their cannabis use, a similar question was posed to non-cannabis users. This question aimed to shed light on the extent to which young people who choose not to use cannabis, hold similar or different views to cannabis users on the issue of how adults, particularly parents, view cannabis. Some of these participants used the same kind of exaggerated language as their cannabis using peers to describe how they believe their parents may react:

- Int** And what do you think parents think about cannabis - like, kids using cannabis?
- Ross (13)** I've asked ma mum what she thought of it and I goes, what would you do if any of us ta'en up cannabis and she goes, just chop your fingers off and make sure you cannae touch it again
- Int** Right
- Robbie (13)** Ma mum says that she'd batter me an' that, and ma dad says he would but if I dae it when I'm aulder it's my life I'm wasting

Other accounts add further weight to the idea that parents are more likely to take a stricter line with cannabis than with alcohol. In this case, the participants seem to challenge this approach on the basis of knowledge they have gleaned from other sources:

- Int** So, how do adults react to young people using cannabis?
- Bridget (13)** My mum would take a schitz
- Barbara (14)** I'd be dead
- Bridget** Yeah, we wouldn't be here
- Barbara** I wouldn't have two legs (laugh)
- Bridget** Yeah, my mum would go crazy and my dad would be even worse because my dad's really protective
- Int** Do you think they'd take a stricter line with cannabis than alcohol?
- Barbara** Yeah, probably, because it's the actual thing that they say, its oh so bad but its not as bad as people say it is because we've been reading about it at school and it doesn't, it isn't half as bad as most people think it is
- Bridget** She thought, my mum thought that my brother was taking hash and she didn't talk to him for something like a month and he wasn't even taking it, so, he wasn't even taking it and she didn't talk to him for a month, so

Some accounts appear to reflect a belief that parents' disapproval is rooted in a lack of knowledge about drugs in general, but also in a naiveté about young people's lives:



**Int** What do you think adults think about young people using cannabis?  
**Billie (13)** Well, I think they're like totally against it because I mean they just don't want us to do it basically  
**Britney (13)** Yeah  
**Billie** It's hard to explain  
**Britney** I think most adults are really quite clueless about the whole subject  
**Billie** Yeah, they are

**Int** What do you think adults make of young people using hash?  
**Nichola (15)** Probably disappointed that they're daein' it. Probably when they were younger there wasn't really much, like the amount of people that dae it and the younger they're getting. Be quite disappointed and shocked as well. Depends how much you know about kids actually daein' it, 'cause people who are adults who dinnae have any kids and dinnae know a lot about kids, but maybe adults who know a lot. They might actually dae it theirsels' and think that its all right, but I would be quite disappointed

The next account reflects a view that not only are adult naïve about young people's lives in general, they may also be oblivious to their own children's cannabis use:

**Int** What do you think adults think about folk using hash, then, young folk using it?  
**Niamh (13)** Well, I'll tell you something, if any of their mothers found out, I think all of them would be sorry. 'Cause I bet you any money when they go hame, like you watch videos wi' your mum and they'd be like, aye, if you ever done that, I'd batter you an' they'd be going, that's shocking bairns at that age, daein' it, but her son or daughter would be daein' it  
**Nat (14)** And, like other people's mum's would be bragging an' that about other folk's bairns daein' it. Like this person and that person, they're smoking hash an' that

A few of the non-cannabis users expressed an alternative view - that in some instances, parents ignore their children's cannabis use because they may themselves be involved with cannabis:

**Int** Do you think using cannabis can get you into a lot of trouble?  
**Nicholas (13)** Aye  
**Norm (13)** Aye, if you get found out, if the police kent you were daein' it, you could get lifted for it an' that, and if my mum and dad were to find out I was daein' it, I would get murdered, widnae even bother me  
**Nicholas** End up killing theirsels  
**Norm** I think some of the people that dae it, some of the Greeners  
**Nicholas** Their mum and dads ken  
**Norm** And their mum and dads find oot, they're no' bothered, 'cause they maybe dae it theirselves, that's why they're daein' it

From these accounts, it would appear that there are both similarities and differences between the cannabis users and their non-cannabis using peers in terms of how they perceive adult attitudes and responses to young people's cannabis use. For the most part, there appears to be a general consensus among users and non-users that parents strongly disapprove of young people using cannabis. Hence, users try to avoid detection while non-users avoid cannabis altogether. However, while both sets of participants used exaggerated language to describe how they feel parents may react, in the case of the non-cannabis users, there did not appear to be a clear distinction between 'knowing' and 'getting caught'. This contrasts sharply with the users' accounts which appear to suggest that parents would only take action if evidence of their involvement with cannabis was certain and realised. Some of the non-users' accounts also shed additional light on the difficulties that parents face in managing their children's risk behaviours, suggesting that naiveté about young people's lives may play an important role, although a few participants appeared to feel that some parents, those who use cannabis themselves, are unlikely to be very concerned.

### **Older siblings and young people's cannabis use**

Data from this study suggest that family members other than parents -mainly older siblings - may also play an influential role in shaping the beliefs and behaviour of their younger brothers and sisters. This supports preliminary findings from a current study with Scottish pre-teenagers which appears to suggest older siblings who use drugs may be more influential than drug using parents in shaping their younger children's behaviour (McKeganey, 2002). In some cases, participants' accounts describe older siblings, not from their own family, but from the families of friends. These accounts are treated in the same way as those that involve participants' own families since they involve a clear link between siblings in the same family. Two themes emerged, the first relating to older siblings being actively involved in some way in the cannabis use of their younger family member, the second exploring how older family members may act as a source of lay knowledge about cannabis. Although these two themes address different aspects of the involvement of older family members, they are not self-contained and mutually exclusive but, rather, interlinked. The data will therefore be presented and discussed in a way that reflects the interconnectedness of the two themes. In most cases, the extracts involve participants talking about their own personal experience, although there are a few instances where participants refer to their perceptions of the experience of other families.

In this first extract, all three participants describe how they first came to try cannabis:

- Int** When did you start using hash, then? What age were you roughly?  
**Neville (13)** I was, it was about primary seven or first year, that's when I started smoking hash
- Nick (14)** Naw, I was about seven or something. I was camping on this trip and there was about twenty five of us, like, and they handed it to me and that and I took a couple of puffs and that was me
- Neville** That was like me. I went up to this woman's hoose 'cause I mucked about wi' her daughter and she's sitting, and she goes, "do you smoke hash?", and that and like she had all her pals and I didnae want be a daftie, and I said, "aye, I smoke hash" and she says, "here"
- Int** What did it feel like the first time you did it?  
**Neville** Almost killed myself, man (laugh). I just took a draw, and (mimicked someone coughing violently)
- Int** Yeah. What about you, Nigel, have you ever tried it?  
**Nigel (14)** Aye, I've tried it wi' my big brother. My big brother and all his pals but I dinnae dae it anymore

Here, Nigel seems to clearly implicate his older brother in his first time of trying cannabis, although his account is equally clear that this experience has not led to more regular use. From Nick's account, it is impossible to tell if any family members were involved in the camping trip which he implicates in his first trying of cannabis. Given his very young age at the time of this trip, it does seem likely, however, that older teenagers, possibly older brothers and sisters of his friends, may have been involved. Neville's account is unusual in this study because, unlike all the other participants, he appears to use cannabis recreationally with adults as well as with peers. This part of his account appears to implicate the mother of one of his friends in his first trying of cannabis. His account suggests that he felt unable to refuse the offer of a joint because to do so would have meant an unacceptable loss of face. It seems unusual that at the young age of 13, Neville would be so concerned about his image in relation to a group of adults, but perhaps this reflects both the importance that Neville seems to place on presenting a macho image and the role that drugs play in this particular community. This tendency for Neville to use cannabis socially with his peers, but also with adults appears to be a pattern apparently established the first time he was offered cannabis.

The way Neville himself discusses this aspect of his cannabis use throughout the interview suggests that in his experience at least, this is not unusual, but rather, is a

taken for granted practice for him. This is evident in the way he talks about his routine of sharing a joint with his adult contact and then going off to join his mates:

**Neville (13)** I just go up to this person's hoose and I just get her to roll me a few joints and then smoke one there, 'cause you cannae, like, just go up and then no' have a joint. So I smoke one wi' her and then disappear

This extract also suggests that Neville buys his cannabis from an adult source rather than from friends around the same age, a distinction which is clearly regarded as important within the legal context of the new proposed cannabis laws. While this pattern of smoking cannabis with adults may raise a number of concerns, there also seems to be a positive aspect to Neville's apparent immersion in adult cannabis using circles:

**Int** And see if you're buying hash, do you ever get offered anything else?  
**Neville (13)** I've never been offered anything else, like - well, I've been offered but no' off the person I go tae 'cause she tells me, naw, dinnae dae this, dinnae dae that, look how I've ended up, an that

This extract seems to suggest that the person who supplies Neville with cannabis, by virtue of her own apparent personal misfortunes with other drugs, acts as a positive role model, actively discouraging him from trying anything else. This appears to challenge a popular public discourse that young people are at risk of being introduced to hard drugs as a result of their cannabis use. In contrast, the role played by Neville's supplier appears to represent another manifestation of the harm reduction approach employed by many parents, most often practised in relation to alcohol, and designed to protect young people from the potential harmful effects of other substances. This is not to say, of course, that the situation is risk-free since it would appear that Neville has, in fact, been offered other drugs and he continues to move in circles where they are easily available.

The experience of active parental or adult involvement in the cannabis use of offspring was unusual in this study, however, and in most other cases, it was older siblings, or the older siblings of friends who were influential in this regard. In several instances, older brothers were instrumental in offering younger siblings their first try of cannabis, usually in the form of a joint rolled with tobacco but sometimes, using a more potent method:

**Nicol (15)** Aye, well mine was my pal's, my pal's brother just came up and he handed us a bong and I just took it and I was pretty fucked after it



In many cases, older brothers, occasionally sisters and cousins, while not actually involved in smoking cannabis with their younger siblings, reportedly played a role in the cannabis use behaviour of younger relatives:

- Int** Right, and do folk chip in to buy a bit - is that how it works?  
**Brad (13)** Aye  
**Ben (15)** Aye, what me and and my pal Scott used to do - he'd buy it, like, for during the week, and he'd share it wi' me, and I'd get it for the week-end and I'd share it wi' him. He used to get it from his cousin and get quite big deals

This extract seems to suggest one of two roles for Brad's older cousin. Either he himself sold cannabis directly to his younger cousin, or he acted as supplier to his younger relative and his friends, presumably providing a buffer between them and the 'dealer' who supplied the cannabis further up the chain. The next account describes how older siblings sometimes apparently go beyond their role as suppliers of cannabis, acting as a money-lending service which enables younger siblings to buy their cannabis on credit:

- Int** Right, so is it older folk that sell it or would it be mates that you know, or?  
**Rob (13)** Older folk, well, like, sometimes my big brother gets me it, or other pals get it  
**Int** Right, what happens if you dinnae have the money the next Friday?  
**Ray (13)** Well, my big pals they just gie us time to get it - one of oor pals just pays it until we gie them the money for it - even get it from my big sister, so

In other cases, parents appeared to be unwitting suppliers of cannabis, although this point was expressed mainly in abstract terms about other families:

- Int** What kind of age do young folk start using hash, would you say?  
**Robert (14)** Twelve  
**Int** As young as that, yeah?  
**Robert** It's that easy to get haud o'. 'Cause, ken some folk's mum and dad's, ken, take it and they just, like, nick a wee bit off o' them. And get started on it, and once they dae it, they keep nicking it and buying it and everything  
**Neil (15)** There's lassies, like, whose dads deal it and a' that, and that's how they get it easy, 'cause they steal it from their dad

So, it would appear that older family members, sometimes the families of peers, can be involved at an active level in the cannabis use of younger siblings. In some cases, they are implicated in younger siblings' initial experimentation with cannabis, in others they act as suppliers, sometimes providing a credit facility. In one unusual case, a 13 year old appears to be regularly involved in smoking cannabis recreationally with the parent of one of his peers. Older siblings, reportedly cannabis users themselves, also appeared to exert influence in more subtle ways. In particular, these family members seemed to act as lay experts, possessing knowledge and experience relating to various aspects of cannabis use. The following extracts explore the nature of these various forms of lay knowledge and discuss how this may have helped to shape the cannabis use behaviour of younger family members.

Evidence from a number of interviews in this study suggest that older siblings were often a key source of information about the potential effects of cannabis on people's health. A particularly intriguing finding was the apparently relatively widespread belief that cannabis is not only less harmful than cigarette smoking, it also somehow acts to combat or even reverse the detrimental effects of this behaviour:

- Int** O.K., using cannabis is good for your health - have you heard that before?
- Neal (14)** Aye, it clears your lungs or something, I've heard that it clears your lungs, it's good for arthritis and that stuff
- Int** Where did you hear that it clears your lungs - is it just like a story that goes about?
- Neal** My brother

In several other instances, participants themselves raised this issue spontaneously:

- Robert (14)** Smoking hash is better for you than smoking actual normal fags, well folk say so
- Int** Yeah, why do you think that is?
- Rose (15)** 'Cause it clears your airways or something - I dinnae ken, that's what I got telt
- Int** Yeah, where did you hear that from?
- Rose** My brother, that's what he says to me

As in the previous extract, an older brother is cited as the source of this particular belief about the alleged 'therapeutic' potential of cannabis. It is interesting to note that in some cases at least, this kind of belief appears to gain currency via older family members, although in the absence of further data, it is impossible to tell how older siblings themselves acquired this knowledge, or indeed, where the idea

originated from in the first place. Another recent study about drugs highlighted how young people found the continual bombardment of official messages about drugs and danger unhelpful and confusing (Shiner & Newburn, 1997). As a result, they relied on more local and experiential sources such as 'urban myths and stories' which transmitted knowledge about both the positive and negative effects of drugs. Based on local experts' real experience of drugs and drug taking, these sources had a credibility and salience which other sources of knowledge may lack. In the case of this cannabis study, it seems likely that as well as this 'urban myth' about cannabis, broader political issues, in particular the ongoing debate about the medical use of cannabis for therapeutic purposes also played a role in the construction of their views about cannabis. Overwhelmingly, participants supported the legalisation of cannabis for this purpose, often describing media coverage of this issue and highlighting the injustice of people suffering from diseases like cancer and multiple sclerosis being subject to legal sanction for using cannabis to alleviate their symptoms.

In many instances, younger family members also appeared to learn about the physiological and sometimes psychological effects of cannabis from the experience of older siblings:

**Billy (13)** My sister smokes it tae get tae sleep (laugh)

**Int** So what's funny about using cannabis then?

**Danni (14)** The feeling that you get, like it's funny, but I wouldn't take it too far because my sister's friend, em he had, he started seeing people that weren't there

**Int** Right

**Danni** Because he needed it sort of every day and he had to go to a mental home for a couple of months, but I don't like smoke it that much, just occasionally, because I like the feeling, it like, makes you sleep and that

In some cases, participants also apparently learned about novel ways of using cannabis by watching older siblings:

**Rose (15)** See, you can basically put hash in everything, you can have it in cakes and everything. Have it in your dinner if you want, just burn it and crumble it in

**Int** Right, so folk are doing all these different things?

**Rose** Aye. I've seen ma big brother put it in jam on toast and crumble it on the jam

A few participants also talked about their beliefs about the potential for cannabis to be used as a way of helping to manage grief. In this instance, the source of this belief appears to be a parent rather than an older sibling:

**Norman (14)** And that's what my mum turned to when my grandad died as well, 'cause my grandad and my auntie died in the same month, eh, in '85, so

Some participants also appear to draw upon their older siblings' experience with cannabis as a benchmark for comparing it with other drugs:

**Int** Yeah, so some folk that use hash, then, don't use other drugs as well?

**Norman (14)** Well, my big brother, I can guarantee you he wouldnae take another drug. He's got his heid doon tae the mats, like he's a working boy

In this instance, Norman's assessment of his brother's conscientiousness at work seems to allow him to make a clear distinction between cannabis as relatively benign, on the one hand, and other, more harmful drugs which have the potential to interfere with the demands of day to day life. In a similar vein, the following participant appears to be following the example set by her sister in setting limits and boundaries which clearly set cannabis apart from other drugs:

**Int** Do you think young people are into using stuff like hash and alcohol and that a lot more than they used to, or do you think that has changed?

**Danni (14)** Yeah, because my sister never used to do anything else, but the talk is not to go past hash yet, nothing stronger, no-one uses anything stronger, or I wouldn't be friends with them

The next extract, however, could suggest that in some cases, advice from older family members does not always ring true for some participants in terms of their own experience:

**Int** So how come some folk go on like from hash to harder drugs like you were talking about and some folk don't?

**Bruce (15)** 'Cause it's a lot bigger dunt (effect)

**Bret (15)** Yeah, that's what happened to me. My auntie before I started daein' it, eh, she says, folk that says to me at school that they've smoked hash before they've done anything, it disnae make you want to go on to anything bigger. Well, I done it, I got telt about the e's and what they can dae and then when you take them, the first yin's always the best, you cannae beat that, ken, 'cause your body's never hud it before. And



once you've had your first e, you feel the difference, you ken the difference, you pure love everybody an' that

This account is a bit ambiguous but it may suggest that both peers and an older family member have offered advice which challenge traditional ideas about the potential for cannabis to lead to more serious drug taking. An alternative reading, however, is that Bret's auntie is actually challenging what peers appear to be saying. If this is indeed the case, then it would appear that her advice has fallen on deaf ears since Bret has reportedly gone on to try at least one other drug. This pattern of progressing from cannabis to other drugs was, however, unusual in this study.

From these accounts, it would appear that older members of the family sometimes play a negative role, in the sense that their influence may encourage or condone their younger relatives use of cannabis and on some occasions, pass on inaccurate information. Some accounts, however, also suggest that this influence can also be positive, for example, it can help young people to draw sensible boundaries in relation to their potential involvement in a constellation of risk behaviours. Other accounts also seem to suggest that older siblings may also play a more explicit role as agents in the parenting process, actively discouraging younger brothers and sisters from using cannabis and other substances:

- Int** Is it different for lads and lassies, then?
- Norrie (15)** Most of them are like - if we see wee lassies smoking, like out of the lassies group, we usually just take them off them, eh and just put them away and stand on them
- Neil (15)** Aye, like my wee sister, her and all her pals smoking, if I see my wee sister smoking, I
- Norrie** Take them off them
- Neil** Aye, just grab her fags and snap them
- Int** Uhu
- Norrie** I've took a twenty pack off somebody once and smashed them up, ripped them all up
- Neil** So have I
- Int** Right, so how come you do that?
- Norrie** 'Cause I dinnae like wee lassies like smoking, like I dinnae want them to get started

In this extract, the participants describe how they actively police the smoking behaviour of their younger sisters and their friends in order to try and prevent them from becoming regular smokers. While this extract appears to have a gendered

dimension to it, other accounts suggest that this is not necessarily the case and that age is clearly a contributory factor in shaping this response:

- Int** How come folk, do you think some folk really get into using hash and other folk don't?
- Darren (15)** Em I think wi' me that I don't smoke it now 'cause I got a sore head and I felt ill off it. And like my brothers as well, they wouldn't be happy with it. So I just don't risk it. I wouldnae even attempt to get away wi' it with ma brothers
- Int** Would they they give you a hard time if you?
- Damien (15)** Probably batter him
- Darren** One of my brothers wouldn't be too bothered about it but my other brother would go mental at me. Probably would batter me

In this extract, Darren's behaviour is apparently moderated by the potential intervention of one of his older brothers. In a similar vein, one of the participants in the following account describes how he would respond if he discovered his younger brothers using cannabis:

- Robbie (13)** Some people would do it (use cannabis) 'cause other people dae it and they think it's cool and they think it makes them hard and it makes them popular and that but it doesnae
- Ross (13)** I think it just makes them look
- Robbie** Daft
- Ross** Aye, stupit. It's their life that they're wasting and everything
- Robbie** And like, if I ever caught, like, my wee brothers daeing it, I'd batter them. And I'd make sure they could never dae it again

The final extract in this section provides an alternative perspective on the apparent motivation of older siblings who take on this kind of policing role, in this case, in relation to alcohol:

- Neville (13)** Yeah, we batter your sister (laugh)
- Int** So how come you don't like her drinking?
- Nick (14)** I only batter her like, I dinnae batter her like, wi' a couple o' wee shorts, like. But half the time she comes doon the street absolutely steamin' an' that, falling over cars an' that, and you're like that, and everybody's whispering, there's his sister, and look at her, she's in a state, just pure gets you a beamer (red face), man
- Neville** Aye
- Nick** And you end up going radge (mad), ken what I mean

While for the most part older siblings appear to take on this parenting role in order to protect younger siblings from the potential consequences of various risk behaviours,

this last extract highlights a very different motivation. In this instance, the potential costs of younger relatives getting drunk appear to lie more with older siblings who risk damage to their image and standing with their peers. From this perspective, disciplining younger sisters who get drunk seems to be as much about protecting themselves as their siblings.

### **Summary**

This chapter has explored aspects of young people's relationships with their families in order to more fully understand how this social context may affect their cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. It has discussed the ambiguous dimension of 'knowing' from the perspectives of young cannabis users and shown how 'getting caught' appears to occupy a distinctive position in triggering a parental response. This distinction, however, was not evident in the accounts of non-cannabis users, who for the most part appeared to believe that parents would disapprove and act robustly either way. This chapter has also highlighted an important distinction between alcohol and cannabis, showing how parents appear to adopt a harm reduction approach to their children's drinking while turning a blind eye to their cannabis use unless evidence of this behaviour is certain and realised. Finally, it has shown how older siblings can often be active agents in shaping young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. The next chapter turns its attention to a social context which is of central importance to most young people at this particular stage in their lives - their relationships with their peers.

## **CHAPTER 5:        PEER CONTEXT**

### **Introduction**

As noted in the literature review, the peer context plays an increasingly important role in young people's lives as they approach and move through adolescence. Greater significance is given to peers as companions and providers of advice and support. Peer networks also provide opportunities for practising new behaviours and developing the necessary social skills for interactions with same sex and opposite sex friends (Hendry et al, 1993, Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). They play a key role in helping young people to develop a range of social competencies, for example, learning to express empathy with others and becoming more confident in presenting and carrying out plans within one's group. However, for many young people, the price for group acceptance is conformity to the peer group in matters such as personal appearance, musical tastes and leisure activities. This chapter will explore how factors operating at a peer group level may have helped to shape young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour in the context of this study. In particular, it will present data which appear to suggest that young people's cannabis use may have a gendered dimension, with cannabis occupying a more significant place in boys' than in girls' lives, especially in the context of street-based leisure cultures. This will build on existing literature on cannabis and on the wider literature on gender and young people's risk behaviours. In drawing a distinction between 'peers' and 'friends', it will also build on existing literature on boys' and girls' friendships. Finally, this chapter will discuss non-cannabis users' accounts of how they spend their leisure time and describe briefly some of the strategies that these participants appear to use to avoid exposure to cannabis.

The idea that boys and girls may have a different relationship with cannabis emerged at an early stage in data analysis and in relation to two analytical processes. Firstly, a broad preliminary comparative analysis of boys' and girls' accounts about cannabis was conducted. These initial readings seemed to suggest that many boys tended both to talk about cannabis in different ways and to use it in different ways and in different contexts. At the same time, an analysis of participants' responses to a specific line of questioning inviting them to reflect on possible gender differences, was conducted. In many cases, this related to two types of data. The question was asked in a number of different ways during the interviews themselves, the particular wording chosen to reflect the discussion that had gone before. In cases where this question was not raised in the interview or where it seemed useful to explore the



theme further, the issue was also raised again in the context of a card game introduced towards the end of the interview. Most participants were asked if cannabis is different for each sex and some were also asked to say why they think members of the opposite sex use cannabis. In a few exceptional cases, some of the female participants themselves appeared to draw upon gendered ideas to explain their views on cannabis, introducing this perspective prior to any questions being asked about it. In order to further explore this particular feature of young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour, data were coded to allow extracts from transcripts relating to this theme to be stored, retrieved, and analysed in more detail. Data which appeared to run counter to this trend were also coded and these are included in the discussion that follows. Using illustrative extracts from interview transcripts, this chapter will begin by discussing participants' own perspectives on the possible gendered nature of young people's cannabis use. It will then explore apparent variations in how boys' and girls' talk about cannabis and the meanings they attach to this behaviour. In particular, it will argue that among young cannabis users, cannabis appears to have a greater significance for boys, particularly in the context of street-based leisure cultures.

### **Girls talking about boys**

As noted above, the idea that young people's cannabis use may have a gendered dimension to it was introduced by way of a particular line of questioning during the interviews themselves and in the context of an 'agree-disagree' card game introduced towards the end of most of the interviews. This part of the chapter will show that most participants seemed to agree with the notion that cannabis is different for boys than it is for girls. These participants drew upon a range of ideas to support their view and suggested a number of possible differences. The discussion will begin, however, with two exceptional cases where the participants themselves, all girls, introduced a gender dimension to the discussion prior to any questions being asked about it. In both instances, these participants also appear to argue that cannabis is different for boys than it is for girls, although there is an element of uncertainty in both accounts:

- |                   |                                                                           |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Int</b>        | What about hash - is that something that's around a lot?                  |
| <b>Nat (14)</b>   | Naw- aye - no' in our crowd, like, no' for us, but a few people - laddies |
| <b>Niamh (13)</b> | Laddies, that's what they like                                            |
| <b>Nat</b>        | That's what they dae                                                      |
| <b>Int</b>        | So is it not something that lassies do very much?                         |

**Nat**                      **Nup**  
**Niamh**                Naw, there's maybe lassies in other crews that dae it, but I think it's stupid. But I wouldnae drink or smoke - I think it's a waste of time and a waste of money

This view that cannabis is something that boys, but not girls, do, appears to be informed by the experience of their own peer group. It also seems to be a product of their personal views on a range of risk behaviours. Their concession, however, that this may not be the case in other peer groups perhaps suggests that they also consider young people's peer affiliations to be an important contributory factor, irrespective of gender. In the next extract, Briony echoes the view that cannabis is more common among boys than it is among girls, this time drawing on what she has observed in the wider context of her school:

**Briony (14)**    I'm not actually being sexist or anything, but I think that smoking is more common in girls, and cannabis, like most boys I think smoke cannabis. I've found that there's quite a lot of boys in our school that smoke it, and like, there's less girls. That's quite strange - I don't know why that is, but it's mostly boys that use cannabis

Further probing on this issue later in the interview provides Briony and her partner with an opportunity to think again about something which on first reflection appears to be an unexpected, or at least hard to explain, observation. This time, between the two of them, they develop a theory which seems to provide an explanation for this apparent gender difference. They seem to suggest that cannabis is more widespread among boys because, like alcohol, it provides them with an opportunity to show off, a view that is also expressed in several other girls' interviews. These participants, though, whilst recognising this gender dynamic, firmly reject the logic upon which it is based. Elsewhere in their interview, they discuss and dismiss as unfair, gendered processes going on in their own families. It would appear that issues around gender are particularly salient for them and this perhaps helps to explain why they introduced the issue in the first place:

**Int**                      And again, is that (cannabis) a girl thing or a boy thing, or do both do it?  
**Briony (14)**        I think  
**Babs (14)**            I would say that's more a boy thing  
**Briony**                Yeah, a boy thing, I don't know why that is actually  
**Babs**                    Yeah I don't know - I think they think they can handle more and they kind of

- Briony** It's the same with drink, like, they think, oh, wee whitey (feeling of sickness and disorientation), ken what I mean like, had too much to drink, what have you had, oh, is that it? But when it comes down to it, like, I think they're just exactly the same
- Babs** Yeah, I mean they're just, I mean guys can take a wee bit more, I would say, but I know for a fact that athletic people can take more drink than non-athletic people because it gets out of their system quicker so I mean its really a load of rubbish, because I'm probably fitter than half the guys out there. So it's like, wee whitey, what have you had this time? But I mean it's probably the other way around

Other female participants who view cannabis mainly as a boys' thing seem much more certain about the underlying reasons. The next two accounts draw upon the idea that boys' cannabis use is largely to do with trying to acquire a particular type of identity:

- Int** So, why do you think they (boys) do it?
- Rhia (14)** Just to act hard, eh, 'cause if they smoke hash, they'll go like they're really hard but they're no' really - they're just puppies. They're just pussies - wee laddies that smoke hash. They think they're hard wi' a bottle o' cider in their hand, but they're no', they're just a bunch of big plebs
- Int** Do you think cannabis is more a laddie thing or do girls do it as well?
- Roseann (12)** I think it's mair a laddie thing
- Int** Why do you think that is?
- Roseann** I think they just try to act smart doing all that - Scott does

These participants hold the view, then, that boys use cannabis in order to appear 'hard' or 'smart' and their accounts imply that this may be something to do with boys' desire to emulate qualities associated with certain types of masculinity (Douván & Adelson, 1966, Griffin, 1993). A recent study exploring issues of masculinity among 11-14 year old boys sheds further light on this. This study found that boys are under pressure to conform to particular types of 'hegemonic' masculinity such as being 'hard', being good at sport, not being seen to get on with school work, and not doing anything that could be construed as 'girlish' (ESRC, 2000). Another account from female participants in this study links boys' desire to appear hard with the competitive nature of some, but not all boys' personalities. The implication seems to be that for some boys, their friendships with one another are characterised by a competitive dynamic which requires them to compete with one another to look hard. From the perspective of these two girls, using cannabis is one way of achieving this:

- Int** Do you think - is there a gender thing in using cannabis, do you think?

- Bridget (13)** I think boys use it more to act hard, because boys are really competitive
- Barbara (14)** Yeah, definitely
- Bridget** Apart from some of the sensible ones who would just say, 'no', but most of the boys, every boy that we know in our class, in our registration class, almost everybody I think would take it just to act hard
- Barbara** Yep, definitely

It is possible that boys' desire to look hard is partly aimed at impressing girls but the literature on boys' friendships suggests that they are more likely to be concerned with impressing each other at this stage in their lives. Much of the research evidence in this area suggests that boys and girls use and view friendships in quite different ways (Hendry et al, 1993, Shucksmith et al, 1998). Girls around the 12-15 age range tend to enjoy friendships which are founded upon intimacy and sharing. They have a high regard for each other's individuality and are able to tolerate differences. Boys' friendships at this age, however, tend to operate on almost inverse principles from those of girls, and boasting about aspects of their life is often the primary dynamic.

It is important at this point, however, to be clear about what particular types of affiliation we are talking about. In particular, it is important to make a distinction between 'peers' and 'friends' because these are not the same thing. Peer group norms set influential markers around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, but it is in individual friendships that young people find support and security, negotiate their emotional independence and develop new and different perspectives of themselves (Hendry et al, 1993). As noted above, however, young men and women use and view friendship in quite different ways (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). For girls, the friendship group appears to provide a supportive environment which can often protect against hostile forces within a broader peer group. Boys, on the other hand, may be more susceptible than girls to peer group norms since their friendships are predicated on different values and types of behaviour. The accounts provided by many girls in this study suggest that they, too, recognise these differences and their talk about boys using cannabis in order to compete with one another to look 'hard' seem to implicate, at least to some extent, variations in the nature of boys' and girls' friendships at this stage in their lives.

### **Boys talking about girls**

So far we've only heard one side of the story - a female perspective which seems to support the idea that young people's cannabis use may have a gendered dimension



relating to image and the nature of boys' friendships. But what do the boys have to say? The next part of this chapter will explore this issue from the point of view of some of the male participants in the study. This section will argue that boys, too, hold the view that cannabis is predominantly a gendered activity. It is something that more boys than girls do and those girls that do use cannabis tend to do so, not on their own terms, but in order to emulate or please boys.

In common with the girls' accounts, many of the boys also appear to believe that cannabis is more of a boys' than a girls' thing, pointing to greater numbers of boys using cannabis while more girls use tobacco:

**Int** Uhu, and is it lassies as well that do it (use cannabis)?  
**Norman (14)** Well, say 50 out of 100% of the girls do it, but 100% of the boys do it, eh. I think mair girls smoke fags but mair boys smoke the hash

It is at this point, however, that the boys' accounts diverge sharply from those of the girls. Most of the boys who talked about this issue in the context of this study tended to draw upon hegemonic theories of gender relations to explain why some girls use cannabis:

**Int** So do lassies do it as well?  
**Neal (14)** Some of the lassies smoke, some of them have tried hash, I think they got that from us, eh, but they aren't often smokers, they're lucky if they have it about once or twice a month  
**Int** So it's mainly a laddie thing, then, you reckon?  
**Nathan (13)** Aye  
**Neal** The only time they ever would get it is if one of the lassies had a bit of hash and that's only one lassie that ever gets it, 'cause they got it from us

This account hints at the idea that girls may use cannabis in order to emulate boys. Most of the boys' accounts, however, are much more direct on this point. Several of these accounts draw heavily on gendered ideas to explain their views on young people's cannabis use. These views seem grounded in a belief that cannabis somehow is a male activity and that while some girls do themselves use cannabis, they do so on male terms. This can have several manifestations. In some instances, boys argue that girls use cannabis because they want to be one of the boys:

**Int** Is it just a laddie thing - do you think more boys use hash than the lassies?  
**Rob (13)** Hunners o' lassies come wi' us

**Ray (13)** Tomboys

**Int** Aye, so you were saying that in your experience with cigarettes it's the lads that do it - what about hash, is that a boy thing as well?

**Billy (13)** Aye

**Brian (15)** Aye, well all my mates like, well ken only about two. Lassies just dae it, like, 'cause the lads are daein' it and there's hardly any lassies that are daein' it. It's just maistly guys, and the lassies just dae it

**Billy** Lassies that wannae be guys

**Brian** Aye, they want to be like yin of the boys and a' that

**Billy** Aye

Another account at first glance seems to provide an alternative perspective, but on closer reading, it appears that these participants are also drawing upon a gendered frame of reference to explain girls' cannabis use. Ross's reference to 'anything the boys would do' suggests that he 'sees' these sorts of behaviours as a male preserve. From this perspective, girls who engage in them are simply emulating the boys:

**Int** Girls smoke cigarettes and lads use cannabis - what do you think?

**Ross (13)** Naw 'cause I ken loads of girls that dae, like, anything the boys would do

**Robbie (13)** I ken, I would just say it's even

**Ross** It's equal

Some go further, suggesting that by engaging in this behaviour, girls can curry favour with the boys, in some cases with specific boyfriends:

**Int** Is is something that lassies do as well (use cannabis)?

**Norm (13)** I dinnae think lassies dae it as much as laddies

**Nicholas (13)** There's some lassies, but like not much

**Norm** Some lassies dae it, but mair laddies dae it than lassies

**Nicholas** Uhu

**Int** But you're saying, Nicholas, that some do it but not that many - so what kind of lassies do it?

**Norm** The ones that muck about wi' a' the laddies

**Nicholas** Aye

**Norm** They try and get the laddies to like them

**Int** And is that your experience, do you think it's more boys that use hash?

**Nik (13)** Uhu

**Norris (16)** I notice mair boys. I know people round the back - there's a few girls that do but they just smoke it 'cause their boyfriends smoke, it's a load of rubbish - they dinnae inhale it, they just kind of take it in and blow it back out

So, in common with many of the girls, it would appear that boys also view cannabis predominantly as a male activity. Many boys, in the context of this study at least, have drawn upon gendered ideas to explain why some girls transcend this gender divide and use cannabis themselves. From their perspective, girls' use of cannabis is intimately linked with a desire to please or emulate boys. Girls, on the other hand, explain boys' cannabis use in terms of trying to acquire a particular image which in turn, may be linked to the competitive nature of boys' friendships. These data only refer, however, to girls talking about boys and boys talking about girls. It is perhaps not surprising that these accounts draw upon gendered ideas since in most cases, the issue was presented by the interviewer in gendered terms but also because we know that girls and boys at this stage in their lives do experience life differently. However, gender is just one (albeit a very important) variable in young people's lives. This analysis would clearly benefit from a consideration of what girls say about girls and what boys say about boys but this study did not generate data on these perspectives. The study sample did, however, include one mixed-sex pair and as noted earlier, the study also generated a few accounts which appeared to run counter to what most participants seemed to be saying about the gendered nature of young people's cannabis use. These alternative perspectives may help to further refine our understanding of the role that gender plays in this context and it is to these accounts that this part of the chapter now turns.

### **Different perspectives on young people's cannabis use**

Of twenty-five interviews (pairs and threesomes), there is only one instance where a boy and a girl chose to be interviewed together. This in itself says much about young people's friendship affiliations at this point in their lives. Rose and Robert were clearly close friends (they did not appear to be girlfriend/boyfriend) and they seemed comfortable sharing confidences about each other and their lives during the interview. At the time of interview, they both reported being cannabis users themselves although they claimed to have reduced their consumption to occasional, opportunistic use. In common with the girls' accounts, these participants seemed to agree with the idea that using cannabis provides access to a 'hard' image but their account differs from the others in two important respects. Firstly, they seem to imply that reputation is important beyond the boundaries of both friendships and peer networks. Secondly, they discuss girls' cannabis (and other substance use) in terms of a changing context which in their view reflects girls beginning to outstrip boys.

Not only do more girls use cannabis nowadays, they appear to do so on their own terms and are more open about it:

**Robert (14)** They think they're hard - oh, I smoke hash, I'm solid  
**Int** Right  
**Rose (15)** That's what it is about hash  
**Int** Do you think that's why a lot of young folk do it?  
**Robert** Aye, basically  
**Rose** You get a good reputation, ye ken - oh aye, he smokes hash, he's hard - everybody kens ye if you smoke hash, that's what it's like  
**Int** Right, and if you don't, you're kind of like a nobody, or that?  
**Robert** Aye, naebody kens ye, ye ken - a' the big folk that smoke hash, ken, ken you if you smoke hash, but if you dinnae, they dinnae ken you really  
**Int** And is it something that lassies do as well as lads?  
**Rose** Aye, I would say there's probably more lassies than laddies that smoke hash - you widnae think that, but, it's probably true  
**Int** Yeah, is that something that's changed?  
**Rose** Aye, and there's mair lassies smoking and there's mair lassies drinking  
**Robert** Like my sister-in-law's pals used to like, a' their pals used to take hash and they were drinking and smoking and everything and now, like, the lassies never used to, but they do now - they've done it for quite a while and they try to hide it fae a' the laddies, like, they buy it theirsels off o' somebody else and they have it theirsel' and they try tae hide it but then they just says, aw like, we dae it tae and then they just a' smoke it, like

Given what we know about the differences between boys' and girls' friendships at this stage in their lives, it seems reasonable to consider this mixed-sex pairing unusual. Perhaps Robert to an extent has embraced certain 'female' values which allow him to enjoy a close friendship which does not require a high degree of competitiveness. Rose herself does not appear to conform to dominant female stereotypes and she clearly relates to friends and peers on her own terms. She is neither 'one of the girls' nor is she simply 'one of the boys'. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that these participants have a different perspective on cannabis and it's potential relationship with gender. However, another important difference between this pair and most other female participants, is that Rose and Robert appear to spend much of their leisure time hanging about the streets. This introduces the possibility that apparent variations in boys' and girls' relationships with cannabis may also be related to different types of leisure culture, itself somewhat gendered. From this perspective, rather than gender being the predominant factor in young people's cannabis use, it may be that other factors, in particular, factors relating to the social



contexts in which cannabis is used, are also influential. In the next brief extract, for example, the participants appear to suggest that girls, as well as boys, drink and use cannabis - but there are differences. They seem to be suggesting that peer groups differ - not according to gender - but according to how they tend to spend their leisure time, and it is these different contexts that influence how cannabis is used:

- Int** And lassies, do they do it as well?  
**Neville (13)** Em, no' in our gang they dinnae  
**Nick (14)** They'll just like smoke hash and drink tae, basically, no' like us, but.  
Or if they're having a party somewhere, that's where they'll smoke hash

Other accounts suggest that variations in boys' and girls' cannabis use is down to age and different youth sub-cultures:

- Int** And is it something the lassies are into as well?  
**Damien (15)** Nah  
**Darren (15)** Yeah, well yeah. A lot of girls, but they're all 16/17 as well that do it, maybe some 15 year olds. That would be about it. Skaters, a lot of the skaters do it. They just, that's all they do really is  
**Damien** Skateboard  
**Darren** Skateboard and just smoke and then they just maybe go up the road on their skateboard, they never really go about with any of us. Sit there and smoke away, I think it's brilliant

This account seems to add further weight to the idea that young people's cannabis use may be closely linked with street-based leisure cultures, in this instance, with a particular sub-cultural group - the skateboarding scene. The idea that young people's health related behaviours may be affected by the particular types of leisure association they choose to engage in is not new. One recent study has shown how certain patterns of leisure association, in particular those lived out away from the public gaze, can have a detrimental effect on young people's health related beliefs and behaviour (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). More specifically, another Scottish study, on male youth street cultures, has drawn attention to the close link between young people's cannabis use and how they spend their leisure time (Pavis & Cunningham-Burley, 1999). In particular, this study has shown that cannabis appears to be an integral part of young people's street life. In order to further explore this dimension, the second part of this chapter will explore how young people in this study talked about their own cannabis use. In this way, it may be possible to shed further light on how peer affiliations and the leisure cultures young people choose to engage in may shape their cannabis use.

**Cannabis as an integral part of male street-based leisure cultures**

Building on the discussion that has gone before, the second part of this chapter will argue that cannabis appears to have more significance for boys (although not all boys) than it does for girls, particularly in the context of street-based leisure cultures. It will approach this by presenting illustrative extracts of data which highlight the meanings that young people appear to attach to the role of cannabis in their lives. It will begin with those male cannabis users who appear to spend most of their leisure time away from the public gaze and for whom cannabis appears to have a particular significance. It will also consider data from other male cannabis users who appear to have a different relationship with cannabis, and will present data from the female cannabis users' interviews in order to tease out possible gender variations. Finally, it will contrast these accounts with how non-cannabis users talk about their leisure time and discuss briefly a range of avoidance strategies. In this way, it may be possible to further refine our understanding of the ways in which gender interacts with young people's patterns of leisure association to shape the ways in which boys and girls use cannabis.

Almost without exception, the participants in this study, when asked about what it's like living in their local area, responded in the same way. Even those young people who then went on to reel off a long list of varied leisure activities talked about 'being bored' or 'having nothing to do'. Their use of a 'boredom discourse' to describe this aspect of their lives will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter, but what is significant for this discussion is the role that cannabis appeared to play for those 'bored' young people who spent much of their spare time in unsupervised, 'adult-free' space. Many boys who talked about spending most of their leisure time congregating in the streets, parks and stairwells of their local area seemed to use cannabis as a way of combating boredom. From this perspective, their cannabis use appeared predominantly to be a way of passing the time:

- Int**

Yeah, so why do you think folk do it, then?
- Bret (15)**

Just for a past-time - something tae dae, a different hit from drinking
- Bruce (15)**

Just chilling out, like
- Nicol (15)**

There's nothing tae dae, but like when somebody's got hash, you can go to a stair 'cause a stair's warmer and its something tae dae, you roll a joint, smoke it, and that takes about twenty minutes or something, takes up some time. Then you're stoned and it's, go up to the shops 'cause you've got the munchies, then you just go home and go to your bed

But cannabis is not just about filling time, it also appears to be about creating excitement, making things happen. Cannabis appeared to fulfill this role in a number of ways. For some young people, perhaps those for whom the behaviour itself had become relatively mundane, cannabis appeared to offer an opportunity to taunt the police. In this way, these boys were able to re-introduce an element of risk, thus creating an air of excitement to the proceedings:

**Norman (14)** We've got a wee trick nowadays

**Int** What's that?

**Norman** Take the tips off our fag and then put it on the joint

**Int** Ah, to make it look like a cigarette?

**Norman** Aye, and then if the polis drive doon, we just go like that (mimics someone nonchalantly smoking a joint) and show them the wee orange bit - but it's really a joint (laughs)

Cannabis also appears to play a role in helping some boys to acquire particular types of social identity. From this perspective, experience and expertise with cannabis are highly desirable attributes. As noted earlier in this chapter, many boys' friendships are characterised by a competitive dynamic and it would appear that cannabis may offer opportunities for some boys to maintain or improve their standing with their peers by engaging in exaggerated boasting. This may relate to being able to smoke copious amounts or particularly potent forms of cannabis:

**Bruce (15)** See me and my mates are always smoking hash, like, have competitions and stuff, like, it's crazy. Me and my mates can take a hell of a lot, like, I'm not bragging but we do take a hell of a lot. And if somebody comes into the group and like has one bong and coughs a lot, it's just like, you slag them

**Neville (13)** Double Zero that gets you melted, 'cause my pal, he was smoking it and I said, gies a, and I smoked about two joints and I was wasted

Expertise in using different methods of smoking cannabis also seemed to be a source of kudos for some participants. Some of these boys also clearly enjoyed displaying their knowledge in the context of the interview:

**Int** Right. So, you were saying you like taking a bong - do you roll it in a joint as well?

**Rob (13)** Aye, and we take buckets an' all. Buckets, like, ye get a bucket of water and fill it up to the top and get a two litre bottle and cut the bottom off o' it and you pit, ken a spoon o' mud and you melt it and the bit that's left, you put wee holes in it and then you like seal it along the top and you light it, you put the hash in it and you light it

**Int** Uhu, and what gives you the best hit, then?  
**Rob** Buckets  
**Ray (13)** Buckets, or joints - I like the joints  
**Rob** It's like, we dae a mix, right - that's what you call it when you dae like buckets or bongs, we like to dae a mix and then we roll a couple of joints just like to settle us doon

In an unusual case, one participant claimed to use an accident compensation payment to finance not only his own, but others' cannabis use. This boy was a younger member of a gang which included 15/16 year olds and it seems likely that his generosity was a way of enhancing his popularity and status within the group:

**Int** Do folk do it on their own is it just like a group thing?  
**Nathan (13)** Well some people we ken just buy it for themselves  
**Neal (14)** I've bought it, I've bought it for myself loads o' times, and for my pals. How much have I spent?  
**Nathan** Aye, £70 or something  
**Neal** Nup, £70 my arse. Honestly, I've spent about £500  
**Int** What, over this year, or altogether?  
**Neal** Just since, for my holidays, August, September 'cause I got compensation money and I was going up to the bank every Friday and buying a big bit. A' the gither, 'cause I worked it oot, eh, a' the money that I think I've spent and a' the gither I've spent at least one and a half grand on drink and hash  
**Int** So what did you get compensation for?  
**Neal** I broke my leg

Cannabis also seems to contribute to a rich story-telling culture. Some of these stories as noted above, involved exaggerated boasting about exploits with cannabis and these sorts of stories seem to be part of the ritual of jockeying for social status. Story-telling also appeared to serve another function, though, a function that seemed to have more to do with social bonding than with scoring points. Through this process of story-telling, cannabis events not only had value at the time, they could also be talked about and enjoyed on future occasions. In this way, cannabis seemed to play a role in cementing social relationships through re-living shared experiences:

**Neal (14)** It's good, it gives you good things to remember - when somebody does something - falls, or you get a good laugh, somebody seriously cops a munchie and you're in stitches. Or like, when we were slagging our pal - I mean that was good, that was a good time  
**Nathan (13)** 'Cause he was laughing himself  
**Neal** He was even laughing himself - he was like laughing at him getting slagged



Most of the stories, in this study at least, tended to be about 'good' experiences with cannabis, but some accounts also described 'bad' experiences. In some instances, these 'bad' experiences, as with the 'good' experiences, seemed to be regarded as good story-telling material, in others, they were portrayed as a routine, taken for granted, part of the experience:

<b>Int</b>	Have you ever been ill with hash
<b>Ray (13)</b>	Just a couple of spews sometimes, I spew quite a lot
<b>Rob (13)</b>	Once wi' bongs and hash, but
<b>Ray</b>	Efter you've spewed, you just
<b>Rob</b>	You put water in the bong, but if gets too dirty, the water goes a' mingin' and that's what makes you feel sick sometimes, you have to change the water

So, it would appear that for many of these participants, their cannabis use forms an integral part of street life. It helps to relieve boredom, create excitement and also seems to have a role to play in both jockeying for position in a social hierarchy and in cementing social relationships through involvement in a shared culture. In this sense, these participants can be described as 'cannabis-oriented', whilst most other participants appear to lead much more alcohol-oriented social lives. It would be misleading, though, to assume that this is the case for all of the male cannabis users in this study. It would also be a mistake to imagine that it is only boys who talk about cannabis in these terms, or that street-life is a completely male preserve, although it is true to say that in the context of this study sample, only a few girls appear to share this experience. A few boys appeared to have a different kind of relationship with cannabis. For these boys, cannabis appeared to play a much more peripheral role in their lives. The next part of this chapter will present data from these male participants before going on to discuss some of the girls' accounts of their cannabis use. It will conclude by summarising what these data may tell us about the inter-relationship between cannabis, gender and street-based leisure cultures.

### **Cannabis as an opportunistic, occasional behaviour among boys**

For some boys, cannabis does not appear to be a central part of their social lives. These boys will generally accept a cannabis joint if offered by someone within their wider peer networks but they seem keen to distance themselves from a close association with cannabis, in particular, actually buying it for themselves. This appears to be a key defining feature which differentiates their cannabis use from more regular patterns of use:

- Int** Hash, is that something you've ever tried?
- David (13)** I've tried it, yeah. Both tried it, but I would never buy it. If we get offered it then we'll take it to smoke
- Int** Can you remember back to the first time you tried it? When was that roughly?
- David** I can't remember, but we don't. Its not like a thing we would constantly do. Its just like, it was brilliant, like, its got quite a nice taste to it as well, that's why we dae it. But I don't, we would never buy it, I would never buy it anyway
- Des (13)** Neither would I
- Neil (15)** I've smoked hash before mair than I've smoked fags, but I dinnae like to smoke hash all the time - just sometimes if ma pals buy it, I'll take a draw

Boys who used cannabis in this way also tended to distance themselves from a cannabis user 'identity', not really seeing themselves as cannabis users, whilst at the same time acknowledging that they do use cannabis in certain circumstances. From this perspective, finishing off a joint, for example, does not seem to constitute being a cannabis user:

- Norrie (15)** Well I dinnae really smoke any of it but if it's there, if there's a joint and its got a couple of draws left, I just smoke that

Since these boys also participate in street-based leisure, it is clear that the association between cannabis and these leisure cultures does not hold true for all boys. It is difficult to be certain about what it is about their lives that marks them out as different in this respect but drawing on the broader context of their interviews may provide some clues. Davis and Des, unlike many of the boys in this study, seemed to be relatively content with the range of activities available to them in their local area and beyond. Although they clearly spent some of their time in street-based pursuits, they also appeared to enjoy an active involvement in more structured activities:

- Int** Can I ask you just first of all what it's like living here - how do you like it?
- David (13)** Yes, it's good. Yeah it's near the sea and that and it's got the big hill up there, so. You can do stuff, you know, in Edinburgh but I mean there's not enough youth clubs and that. That's quite bad but there's still a lot to do. Like the Lodge, and down the beach
- Int** Right, so what kind of stuff do you do when you're hanging out at the Lodge and down the beach and that?
- David** Not a lot. Sometimes we go up to the golf course
- Des (13)** Like when we're down the beach we'll go canoeing or something

**Int** Go canoeing, yeah?  
**David** Sometimes we go fishing as well

Neil and Norrie, both a bit older, live in a very different kind of environment - a large, territorial housing estate - and they talk about boredom, not as a fixed state, but as something that both comes and goes and which may increase or decrease over time. They seem determined, though, to overcome some of these constraints and appear to have a range of alternative strategies for managing their boredom:

**Neil (15)** When I'm bored I'd rather go in ma hoose than smoke hash - I just go hame, watch the telly, play computers or something - or even, if I'm bored, I just ask some people if they want to go oot, doon to the chippie or something

**Norrie (15)** There was mair stuff tae dae like last year, dinnae ken how, like, the longer you stay here, like, the more boring it gets I think

**Neil** Ken

**Norrie** It was a' right last year. Mair things, an' that, there was goals up at the top o' the road there

**Neil** Aye, the workies even got us goals

**Norrie** Playing football an' that from ten o'clock in the morning until ten at night sometimes

**Neil** Aye, we used to play till it was dark

It would appear, then, that some boys are more effective than others at managing their leisure time. Having a particular interest in, and access to, certain activities, seems to provide a buffer against prolonged involvement in more alienating and potentially disruptive street cultures. For these boys, cannabis does not appear to play an especially central role since they are involved only in a peripheral way in street-based leisure cultures. But what about the girls? How do their experiences match up with those of the boys' and what does this tell us about possible variations in the role of cannabis in young people's lives? The next section explores these different accounts.

### **Girls and cannabis**

A much larger proportion of boys than girls in this study reported being current cannabis users, around half of the boys and third of the girls. This means that there is less scope for exploring the contexts and meanings that girls appear to attach to their cannabis use. As noted earlier, a further limitation is that few of the girls in this study appeared to engage to any great degree in street-based leisure cultures. In the context of the central argument of this chapter, which links cannabis use with male street-based leisure cultures, this is a significant limitation. In the absence of



sufficient accounts from young female cannabis users who spend much of their time on the streets, it is difficult to identify gender variations and make a robust case based on differences between girls and boys. However, this is an exploratory study and there are some accounts to go on. On the basis of these, albeit limited data, the concluding part of this chapter will show that most girls appear to use cannabis in different ways from most of the boys. It will also show that even those girls who do appear to use cannabis in the context of street-based leisure, do so in different ways and for different reasons than boys.

The girls in this study, even those who also used cannabis, tended to be much more alcohol-oriented. They tended to more discriminating than the boys, matching their cannabis use to very specific contexts, such as 'girlie-sleepovers' or lazy, sunny days during the school holidays. Their accounts seem to suggest that in contrast with many of the boys, their occasional cannabis use is purely recreational and geared towards enhancing social situations:

- Int** So when do folk do it (smoke cannabis)?  
**Briony (14)** Not at discos 'cause you'd just like be sleeping (laugh)  
**Babs (14)** It obviously just makes you like (demonstrates sleepy looking person). After a disco, if some of you have gone back to somebody's house or just kind of like at night  
**Briony** Just if like you're having, like, kind of a girlie sleep-over or if you're at somebody's house  
**Babs** Yeah, if you're having like a night in like with all your mates, like all sleeping over  
**Briony** Just staying at one house and you're maybe just, I don't know  
**Babs** Just like kind of, like having some fun
- Int** What would you rather be doing, drinking or using hash?  
**Mary (16)** I'd rather be drinking  
**Mel (16)** Depends on the situation. Like, usually drinking I would say. But on a hot afternoon, to lie at the Links and be, like, slightly stoned, is quite relaxing because it makes you mellow and it makes everything a bit more funny. But usually drinking

Although this last account involves using cannabis in an outside location, it is very different from the kind of street-based cannabis use which characterised most of the boys' accounts. The participants are older and come from much more privileged backgrounds, and they seem to use cannabis in the context of a very different kind of peer group from many of the other young people in this study. They describe their own mixed-sex peer group as free from hierarchical structures, but another part of



their account appears to suggest that this is not always the case with peer groups who share these socio-economic advantages:

- Mel (16)** There was one girl who was kind of. She was going with one of the boys in our group for about two years or something. And for years she said, "I'm not going to try dope", and then, I think it was just after she split up with him she did try it and now since then, like, the others have been making her try E (ecstasy) and things like that
- Mo (16)** It's 'cause she tried one thing and 'cause she's in that group. It is completely peer pressure in that group
- Int** So in that group it's a bit like that, yeah?
- Mel** I mean I wouldn't say she's completely addicted to it or anything but she like, for years she said, "I'm not going to do it", and then she eventually got pushed into it by the person who was supposed to be her best friend
- Mary (16)** I mean she took E because her ex-boyfriend dared her to do it
- Mel** I mean, it's situations like that. I mean, we don't get any of that. 'Cause to be quite honest, if anyone in our group did that then all the rest would tell them to bugger off
- Mary** Definitely

This account also suggests that for some girls, part of the motivation and rationale behind their cannabis use may be linked to relationships with boys. It is perhaps not surprising that this particular motivation was not mentioned explicitly in the accounts of other female cannabis users, although as noted earlier in this chapter, many boys use this kind of gendered explanation to account for girls' use of cannabis. Although there is no clear evidence that girls may use cannabis in order to please or impress boys, or as a way of gaining access to predominantly male peer groups, it does seem that girls play a more passive role than boys, particularly in relation to obtaining cannabis. Boys, it would appear, are the main suppliers. Furthermore, they may introduce some girls into cannabis:

- Tracey (14)** It's this boy the same age as us. I've known him for years and a' that
- Trish (12)** He just comes round and asks everybody that smokes it and you can go into his room and take buckets
- Toni (14)** Aye, it was just, somebody, boys that go to my school, they, that's how I started smoking hash 'cause I was doon there, but, somebody in my school, and they bought it and then one day I just took a bucket and then I just kept taking mair and mair, I just, I don't know

So far as the female cannabis users in this sample are concerned, it would seem that

cannabis is more common among boys, who also use it more frequently than girls. Furthermore, even when boys supply the girls with cannabis, they tend to keep the lion's share for themselves:

**Int** Right, some people said to me you know that girls don't really do it that much, what's your experience of that?

**Danni (14)** Well, it's mostly boys in the year that actually do do it, but girls do it as well, yeah they do do it, but not like every week-end, every day. I would do it, like, once every two months or so

**Int** Right

**Danni** Not like every day or anything

**Danni (14)** It's usually the lads that get it and the girls buy it off them, usually. I've never known a girl to actually sell it herself, though, it's usually boys that get it and the girls buy it off them

**Int** So it's like people would spend something like a fiver on it or that?

**Danni (14)** Or fifteen

**Int** Fifteen pounds, and folk chip in together to buy it as well?

**Danni** Yeah, mainly girls

**Int** Right, the girls chip in?

**Danni** Because the boys are like possessive of it. They don't like, I mean, they'll take other people for a smoke, but they won't let them, like, go halves with them because they want a big lot for themselves

Girls also appear to have a very different attitude to the potentially negative effects of cannabis. While the boys appeared to regard unpleasant consequences as part and parcel of the experience, and as a source of entertainment, the girls seemed to view this in quite a different light. They were less tolerant than the boys of the negative impact of cannabis on their friends' behaviour. Far from providing entertainment, this appeared to have quite the opposite effect:

**Toni (14)** Sometimes hash makes you feel you want to move about but sometimes, maist o' the time it makes you feel as if you want to just go to sleep, and all that, and its pure.. I hate seeing my pals when they've been smoking hash and I've no', and they're just lying there, you cannae get them moving, they cannae be annoyed, they're just lying, trying to go to sleep and all that, you're pure trying to kick them and a' that

In a poignant, reflective moment, another girl also drew attention to how she feels her own cannabis use has impacted on her school work:

**Tracey (14)** Loses your brain cells and it makes me stupid. 'Cause I used to be good at maths an' that and I'm no' that good anymair

This is not to say that boys are not aware of some of these possible negative consequences, but it does suggest that girls and boys may experience the 'fun' and entertainment value associated with cannabis in different ways. So while boys' story-telling often centred around cannabis events, girls, including those who also used cannabis, seemed to enjoy recounting alcohol-related stories. It was these kinds of events that seemed to provide entertainment for the girls:

**Toni (14)** The last time one of my pals was drinking it wasnae in here. She was drinking that time there - no, not that time, she was drinking a couple of weeks ago and they had to call her mammy up because she couldnae walk or nothing. She was just being sick and she was just standing and she wasnae moving and that, so they had to phone her ma to come and get her. And her ma was like that, asking all of us questions 'cause all oor ma's are pally together, and they were all getting us in the hooses and asking us, 'what was she doing, who was she with', and all that. And I was like, I don't know, but, my other pals that she was drinking with just ended up telling her 'cause there was no point trying to hide it from her 'cause she was going to find out anyway

**Billie (13)** The discos, they're probably the best thing we've got to do here' cause we have them like two every month or something

**Britney (13)** And they're really popular and everybody comes

**Billie** Yeah, they're really popular and loads and loads of people come

**Britney** Yeah, and sometimes we'll go really tarted up or we'll just be casual and there's usually like something, like somebody breaks a window by accident or an ambulance comes because somebody's really drunk

**Billie** Or somebody has to phone their parents or somebody's been sick in the toilets, or somebody's broke the toilet seat (laughing)

**Int** So that's a pretty regular occurrence?

**Britney** Yeah (more laughing)

**Billie** It's sort of died down now - it used to be really, really bad, eh.

And it used to be like five people at a time that got took away in an ambulance and there used to be police here all the time checking on us, but they're not as bad now 'cause things have calmed down and its better now

As noted earlier in this chapter, the only mixed sex interview in this study provides an opportunity to explore an alternative perspective. This is particularly valuable in the context of this discussion about possible gender differences in the role of cannabis in young people's lives. An earlier extract from Rose and Robert's account

shows how they appear to acknowledge a link between young people's cannabis use and aspects of social identity - it's an activity that both conveys a 'hard' image and enhances your reputation in the local area. This is consistent with how many boys talk about cannabis, but appears to be at odds with the girls' accounts. Later in this interview, though, Rose talks about cannabis having lost its appeal and as a result, she appears to have switched to a more opportunistic pattern of use. Perhaps for Rose, cannabis has served its function of 'getting her known' and she no longer needs to use it in order to maintain her status within her social networks. Another extract from this interview also suggests, however, that it is not only cannabis that is beginning to lose its appeal. It would appear that for these two participants, the advantages offered by street life are also beginning to wear a bit thin. Rose's final comment is particularly telling on this point:

- Robert (14)** Some Fridays you get a good laugh, daein stuff - getting chases an' everything. But it can be, like, it'll be guid sometimes and then it'll be crap because we're no' daein' anything. But maistly Fridays are
- Rose (15)** Especially now that we're coming in here, eh, its no' shit, ken its better than being oot in the cold
- Robert** And up at the Centre as well - we go there during the week - that's keeping us off the streets as well. If they had new clubs an' stuff going on, mair stuff a' aboot here. And like I'm no' saying that it'd stop everything happening, but it would stop
- Rose** It would help
- Robert** Ken like crimes happening for, like, younger folk, oor age an' that,
- Rose** Breaking into cars an' that
- Robert** It would be somewhere tae go and it would be something for them tae dae and they wouldnae' be daein' anything they shouldnae be daein'
- Rose** Ye ken 'cause you look forward, right, in the morning, I'd be like looking forward, like, ken the next cold night, tae no' walking the streets. Ken you get a' excited aboot it, 'cause, ye ken, ye ken you're gonnae be warm, ye ken you've got a place to go

Although this analysis is based on data from relatively few accounts, it nonetheless appears to highlight some key differences between the male and female cannabis users in this study. For the most part, girls appear to be occasional, opportunistic cannabis users. They obtain their cannabis from boys who are also often implicated in introducing the girls to cannabis in the first place. Unlike most of the boys, cannabis does not seem to occupy a central position in their social lives. However, as noted earlier, very few girls in this study seemed to engage in a significant way with street-based leisure cultures. Had more girls with this experience taken part in the study, it may have been possible to present a more



convincing explanation relating to how gender and different types of leisure culture interact to shape young people's cannabis use. So far, this analysis has focused on the relationship between gender, cannabis use, and how young people spend their leisure time. What is missing, though, is a discussion of how young people who appear not to use cannabis spend their leisure time, and it is to these alternative perspectives that this chapter now turns.

### **Non-cannabis users' accounts of their leisure time**

Perhaps not surprisingly, and as noted earlier, most of the participants in this study used a 'boredom' discourse to describe what it was like living in their particular neighbourhood, and the non-cannabis users were no exception. On closer examination, however, many of the non-cannabis users did appear to enjoy a wide range of leisure activities. For the boys, these often centred around sport and club based activities. For Norm in particular, it would appear that his involvement in football is a means by which he can express his identity and achieve recognition:

- Int** Right, can I just ask what it's like living here in this area, how do you like it?
- Nik (13)** It's a bit boring sometimes - there's hardly anything to do. We just go to this club and on Wednesday afternoons we go to the motor-bike club
- Norris (16)** We've got a management committee, I go to meetings, that keeps me occupied
- Int** Right, so what else do you do in your leisure time, then?
- Nik** I've got rugby training on Wednesdays as well, so that keeps me until Tuesday and Wednesday but on Thursday I just do nothing 'cause there's nothing to do
- Int** OK, and what about yourself?
- Norris** Football, computer, stuff like that
- Int** Right, so you're both quite keen on sport, then?
- Norris** Yeah, in the summer we play football
- 
- Int** Right, tell me about the last time you had a really good time - you were really enjoying yourself
- Nicholas (13)** The fitba tournament up at Presland
- Norm (13)** Aye, Sunday, no' this Sunday, last Sunday
- Nicholas** Aye
- Norm** We had a fitba' day for our team
- Nicholas** Teencastle View
- Norm** And I played brilliant and I got "man of the match" an' that
- Int** Very good
- Norm** Cannae remember any other time when I had such fun

Sporting activities are not completely a male preserve. Some of the girls also reported having an interest and active involvement in sport. Many of the non-cannabis using girls appear to enjoy a fairly comprehensive range of leisure pursuits, some home and family-based. The two participants in the second extract draw a clear distinction between their use of leisure and the street-based leisure described by many of the cannabis users:

**Int** OK, so how do you enjoy spending your leisure time - I mean you maybe don't have a lot at the moment with exams - what do you enjoy doing?

**Natasha (15)** The club's really relaxing

**Naomi (15)** Yeah

**Natasha** You just come and sit and talk to your friends

**Naomi** We do some sports, swimming and things, go to the pictures

**Natasha** Shopping (laugh)

**Int** So how do you spend your time, then?

**Britney (13)** Em, we go to dance classes every week

**Billie (13)** Yeah, dancing, and we see our friends and that and just stay in the house

**Britney** Eh, and I go up shopping every Saturday to Edinburgh, eh, and the discos here every three weeks

**Billie** Some people hang about in the street, but I don't do that

**Britney** (laugh) we don't do that

**Int** Uhu

**Billie** And go out with my family and stuff like that

These accounts suggest that having an active social life based around organised activities, home and family may play a role in helping young people to avoid exposure to cannabis. It would be misleading to assume, however, that all non-cannabis users avoid street-based leisure and that young people who engage with street-based leisure are necessarily involved with cannabis. Some participants in the current study appeared to both avoid cannabis and spend much of their time hanging out on street corners, albeit apparently out of necessity rather than choice:

**Int** So can I start just by asking you what it's like living here?

**Roseann (12)** Quite good, but sometimes we get bored, like, 'cause there's no' always stuff tae dae. Hardly anything tae dae here

**Ruth (12)** 'Cause like, well on Friday nights we either come here or go, like, up to the community centre but that's no' on a lot of the time. But then there's only like certain nights we can go to certain places

**Roseann** A lot of the time we're just left with nothing to do and just wander

about the streets and sit in parks

**Int** What kind of stuff would you like there to be?

**Roseann** Swimming pool. Like, there's no places for us. I like going to the youth club, you can just like muck around. It's just like being outside but you dinnae have to get cauld and everything and you can just sit and talk and play games and that. It's a lot better

A later extract from the same interview provides a clue as to how these girls manage to avoid getting involved with cannabis. In their view, avoiding certain people is the key to maintaining a distance from cannabis:

**Int** So why do you think folk use hash?

**Roseann (12)** Dinnae ken

**Ruth (12)** There's a laddie in my class who says that he gets hash

**Roseann** But he probably does

**Ruth** He probably does because he mucks about wi' like. I think it depends on like the folk you muck about wi' and who you involve yourself wi'. 'Cause if you get in wi' the wrong crowd like, that's what my cousin Abigail says, she cannae stop smoking now and she's only 16. She got in wi' the wrong crowd and she regrets it and awthing It depends on kind of like, 'cause sometimes, we like, change who we're going around wi' and sometimes, like, they're a' smoking and that, and like, are you wanting a draw and you feel like you've got to say, aye

**Roseann** Aye

These participants are relatively young, however, and, as they acknowledge themselves, their friendships and allegiances to particular people may change as they progress through their early teenage years. While a strategy of staying away from the 'wrong crowd' may be effective at the moment, it may become harder both to avoid exposure and to go against group norms, as more young people experiment with cannabis. However, although cannabis appears to be fast acquiring a reputation as a ubiquitous part of many youth cultures, this is not necessarily the case. For some of the participants in the current study, cannabis appears to hold no attraction nor play any role at all in their lives. From other accounts, it is clear that cannabis is used at least to some degree in these neighbourhoods, but in spite of the existence of cannabis in their local area, it would appear that some young people still manage to avoid any contact with it :

**Int** What about cannabis - what do you think about young people using cannabis?

**Brenda (14)** I think it's stupid

**Bex (14)** It's like disgusting, it's like, people could kill themselves or something

**Brenda** I don't think there are many people around here take drugs  
**Bex** Not the people here, no, none of them. I don't actually know anybody that takes drugs, apart from smoking and drinking  
**Int** So, is in not anything you've really come across?  
**Bex** Nup

**Int** What about hash, is that something that's around a lot?  
**Nichola (15)** Not really, I'd be quite shocked, like, if I saw somebody doing it 'cause its no' like the usual kind of thing you dae

It would appear that most, although not all, of the non-cannabis users in this study spend their social lives pursuing a range of activities, largely avoiding street-based leisure cultures. For both boys and girls the main focus for their social lives seems to be club-based activities. Most of the boys and some of the girls also appear to be involved in sport, and the girls in particular also seem to enjoy shopping and family oriented activities. By steering clear of street-based leisure, the main context within which cannabis appears to be used by their peers, these young people largely avoid exposure to cannabis. The streets are not exclusively colonised by young people who use cannabis, however. Some young people in the current study do appear to spend time in this context and avoid using cannabis themselves. It would appear that the main strategy for achieving this is to avoid hanging about with certain groups of young people. It is important to note, however, that this analysis is based on relatively few accounts and further research is needed to explore in greater detail those factors which help to shape the use and avoidance of cannabis among young people.

## Summary

This chapter has argued that cannabis appears to play a more significant role for some, but not all boys, than it does for girls, particularly in the context of street-based leisure cultures. This may be partly to do with the nature of boys' friendships which can often lead boys to aspire to particular types of social identity and perhaps render them more susceptible to peer group norms. It may also be related to the value and significance that young people place on adult-free, unsupervised leisure at particular points in their lives and their ability to access alternative ways of managing their spare time. In addition to factors operating at the level of the peer group, this chapter has also hinted that aspects of locality may play a role in shaping young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour, and it is to these local neighbourhood influences that the next chapter now turns.



## **CHAPTER 6:      LOCAL NEIGHBOURHOOD CONTEXT**

### **Introduction**

As well as living their lives in families and in the company of peers, young people's lives are also played out, at least in part, within the context of a local neighbourhood. The choices that young people make and the extent to which they are able to exercise agency are likely to be affected to some extent by factors operating at a local level. Young people in this study were invited to talk about where they live and what they thought about their local area. This theme was introduced right at the beginning of the interviews and served two main functions. Firstly, because of its non-threatening nature, it was hoped that this topic would act as a kind of icebreaker, helping participants to feel at ease. Secondly, it was anticipated that this topic would be of some salience to young people and would therefore generate rich data. In this way, it would be possible to contextualise more specific data on young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour and contribute to a fuller understanding of how local factors may help to shape this aspect of young people's lives. By drawing on these data, it was then possible to develop an analysis of how aspects of young people's local environment might be seen to affect their choices and behaviour.

This chapter, then, aims to highlight what some of these factors are, and the impact they may have on young people's lives, in particular their health-related behaviours. Taking advantage of the structure of the sample, this chapter will present accounts from participants living in two contrasting areas - Muirbank and Pentland. These names have been chosen in order to preserve the anonymity of the two communities. Muirbank is a small, semi-rural market town near Edinburgh. It is a relatively affluent area and has few facilities for young people. All fifteen Muirbank participants were recruited from the town's sole youth club. By contrast, Pentland is a large area in Edinburgh itself, comprising several continuous neighbourhoods. It is a predominantly working class area with high levels of unemployment and a history of drug problems. There is a wide range of youth provision in the area provided by both statutory and voluntary agencies. The twenty Pentland participants were recruited from three different youth clubs across the area.

The starting point of this chapter is an assumption that young people, although at a similar stage in their lives, are likely to experience life differently. One context in which these variations may apply is where young people live - the actual spaces they inhabit. This chapter will begin by highlighting what some of these local factors are

and will go on to explore the various ways in which they are experienced by young people who live in each of the two areas. By comparing data from two contrasting areas, this chapter will also show that these local factors vary from area to area. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how these factors may impact on young people's health related behaviour, in particular their cannabis use.

### **Young people in Muirbank - what is there to do?**

The accounts provided by the Muirbank participants suggest that there are three particular aspects relating to locality which appear to have a significant impact on their lives. The first of these, and the one given most prominence by the participants themselves, relates to what there is in the local area for young people to do. Most participants responded to a question about what it is like living in Muirbank by giving a view on the state of local provision for young people. While most young people used a 'boredom discourse' to explain their views on this issue, their responses revealed differences in how they both think about and experience this aspect of their lives. Some talked about there being a real shortage of things for young people to do:

**Int** What's it like living here in Muirbank  
**Bridget (13)** Boring  
**Int** Boring?  
**Bridget** Yeah (laugh)  
**Barbara (14)** Yeah, but it's good because it's safe but there's nothing to do - it would be good if they got some youth things going on apart from youth clubs  
**Bridget** The only thing is this youth club, they were going to close it down and we just found out that they're not - and we were really upset about that  
**Barbara** And that would stop all the discos and that's only once a week that we get to come to it so all the other nights we've got nothing to do  
**Int** Right, so there's absolutely nothing else for young people?  
**Bridget** Yeah, we just have to walk about the streets

**Int** What's it like living in Muirbank?  
**Billy (13)** It's pish  
**Brian (15)** Boring  
**Int** Yeah, how's that?  
**Billy** There's nothing tae dae  
**Brian** There's nothing tae dae, that's what we're daein' here, trying to arrange stuff tae dae  
**Int** Right, so what kind of stuff would you like?  
**Brian** Mair discos  
**Billy** Aye, just anything  
**Brian** Anything, just tae keep us off the streets

Since all of the young people from this area were recruited from the one local youth club, it is perhaps not surprising that many of them talked about the youth club as the only facility dedicated to serving the needs of local young people. This facility is clearly limited in its scope, however, both in terms of access and opening hours and in terms of its 'youth work' context. Some participants, while valuing this resource, would also like to see alternative types of provision. Some also seem to share the view that the lack of organised activities for young people will inevitably result in young people resorting to street-based leisure. There is no obvious consensus, though, about how this gap might be filled:

- Int** What's it like living here in Muirbank?  
**Brenda (14)** Boring  
**Int** Uhu  
**Bex (14)** Totally bored, 'cause there's nothing to do. They should have an ice rink or a cinema or something like that  
**Brenda** Oh, yeah totally. There were rumours going about that they were going to make a Macdonalds but then it wouldn't have been busy enough or something  
**Int** So, how come its boring then?  
**Bex** There's nothing to do

But other Muirbank residents expressed an alternative view. Some young people talked about how they draw upon a wide range of resources to fill their time - organised activities, trips outwith their local area and support networks comprising both friends and family. Also in direct contrast with other accounts, these participants seem to explicitly distance themselves from any association with the kind of street-based leisure cultures that other participants claim they are forced to resort to because of the limitations of existing provision:

- Int** So how do you spend your time, then?  
**Billie (13)** Em, we go to dance classes every week  
**Britney (13)** Yeah, dancing, and we see our friends and that and just stay in the house  
**Billie** Eh, and I go up shopping every Saturday to Edinburgh, eh, and the discos here every three weeks  
**Britney** Some people hang about in the street, but I don't do that  
**Billie** (laugh) we don't do that  
**Int** Uhu  
**Britney** And go out with my family and stuff like that

For others, it would appear that the town does have a lot to offer, at least when you compare it with other, more rural neighbouring villages. Another important distinction is that for some participants, boredom is not so much bound up with a lack of organised facilities for young people, but, rather with there not being many people around. For these young people, having a laugh with friends is the key to having a good social life and this is apparently best achieved in the context of the regular youth club discos. This particular event is clearly the highlight of Muirbank's youth social calendar and it has achieved notoriety because of the excessive drinking culture it seems to encourage. Some young people do not stop at alcohol, though, but also report using cannabis and occasionally, ecstasy, to enhance their enjoyment of this event:

- Int** Right, can I just start by asking you some general stuff, like, what's it like living in Muirbank? Do you both live here?
- Bret (15)** Aye, eh, it's all right. 'Cause like my bird lives in Stenford, and it's totally boring there, it's boring in Langton and every place like that but I mean, Muirbank, there's a lot mair folk live here and that, so it's a' right
- Int** Uhu, and what about yourself, Bruce?
- Bruce (15)** It's a' right, there's too much violence and stuff, too many drugs
- Int** So what's good about the Bridgey (local disco), then?
- Bruce (15)** Everybody's there - have a good time
- Bret (15)** Aye, listen to music
- Bruce** And before it, just get totally mongoled
- Bret** I ken
- Bruce** It's tidy
- Int** Yeah, so when you say get mongoled, do you mean, get drunk, or?
- Bruce** Baith, at that sort of thing. We've baith taken eccies (ecstasy) tae
- Bret** Well, I've stopped them now - I've no' taken them since the beginning of December, that's the last time I had yin
- Bruce** Same with me, I've no' had them for months and months - I've only taken them, like, four times
- Bret** I smoke hash a lot, though
- Bruce** Smoke hash, aye

Other participants appear to have mixed feelings about how well Muirbank caters for its young people. While there are a few activities available to young people, depending on personal interest, there are still large gaps which young people struggle to fill. In spite of the apparent dearth of organised facilities, it would appear that existing resources are also under threat, an irony that is not lost on young people themselves, and one which they clearly perceive to be unfair and counter-productive:



**Int** Can I ask you what it's like living here in Muirbank?

**Babs (14)** It's good, well, there's quite a lot to do now, like. We've got this on a Wednesday night and I go to swimming club

**Briony (14)** I think it's actually quite boring because we've only really got this to do, well, I've got dancing tonight as well, em, but basically. I just go to work because there's like nothing else I'm missing, so

**Babs** Like when it's cold and dark, there's nothing to do

**Briony** There's nowhere for us to go

**Babs** And they were trying to shut this down

**Briony** Yeah, we had to write letters to them and tell them that, like, try to keep it open and everything 'cause there's nothing else for us to do, I mean like, they say because we get in bother, then that's why

**Int** Uhu, so what kind of bother were they talking about?

**Briony** Just hanging about the streets and, just like

**Babs** Making a noise and that because instead of being inside where we can all kind of talk, we all have to shout at each other because we're all outside. And it just kind of gets quite loud

**Briony** It's just boring, night after night, it's just boring

**Babs** Yeah

### **Muirbank youth - a stigmatised group?**

Young people living in the same small town, and attending the same youth club nonetheless appear to differ in how they view and experience local life, in particular how they feel their leisure needs are catered for. While some appear to have access to a wide range of resources which keep them relatively content, others say they have to take to the streets, a development that is increasingly bringing them into conflict with others in the town and contributing to a situation where young people seem to be being treated as a stigmatised group. Some participants talked, for example, about how they feel they are unfairly treated by local shopkeepers and officials in charge of local facilities. In an informal discussion, one of the local youth workers also expressed her concern about local responses to young people, who it would appear are increasingly seen as 'a problem'. Clearly, the concerns that others in the community have are not completely without foundation. The youth club discos, for example, are a focus for excessive drinking:

**Int** So, what's it like at the club, do you come to discos here?

**Billie (13)** Yeah, it's really good- it's just a total laugh. Sometimes, like usually when everybody else is drunk, it's quite funny actually watching. .

**Britney (13)** Quite a lot of people, well they get a bit happy when they come here, not like high

**Billie** (Laugh)

**Britney** Nobody does anything like that - but just like a little bit tipsy or something and you just come in and you just have a good time

**Billie** It's just a good laugh because, I mean, because the discos, they're probably the best thing we've got to do in Muirbank 'cause we have them like two every month or something

**Britney** And they're really popular and everybody comes

**Billie** Yeah, they're really popular and loads and loads of people come

**Britney** Yeah, and sometimes we'll go really tarted up or we'll just be casual and there's usually like something, like somebody breaks a window by accident or an ambulance comes because somebody's really drunk. Or somebody has to phone their parents or somebody's been sick in the toilets, or somebody's broke the toilet seat

For some of the girls, though, the appeal of the discos seems to extend beyond alcohol and its effects. The freedom of mixing with all sorts of young people, having the chance to dress up, enjoy a dance and perhaps get together with a boy - all of these factors - not just alcohol and its effects - seem to mark out the discos as special for the girls from Muirbank. In contrast, as noted earlier, for some of the boys, 'getting mongoled' appears to be the main draw, at least so far as their interview account is concerned:

**Bridget (13)** And the discos, you can hang around with anyone - you just go up and

**Barbara (14)** Because we've been particularly drunk (laugh)

**Bridget** Yeah, because you're just with everyone, you're not there with a certain group of people. And there's a lot of boys and girls kissing (laugh)

**Int** And is that one of the big attractions?

**Bridget** Probably (laugh)

**Barbara** Yeah (laugh). And getting to dress up, and thing that we hardly ever get to do

Some young people, although by no means all, do engage in street-based, anti-social activities, particularly those who seem to spend their leisure time with peers, to the exclusion of family. As noted in an earlier chapter, cannabis use and other low-level 'criminal' activity are also part of a constellation of behaviours which characterise these kinds of leisure culture:

**Brian (15)** I've been charged, like, about seven times

**Billy (13)** Aye

**Brian** And arrested about twice, or something

**Billy** I've been charged eighteen times with assault and breach of the peace

**Brian** And breaking into places and a' that

**Billy** And I got charged for kicking in Peter's door

**Brian** When I get lifted, the police an' that find skins in my pocket and they dinnae even say anything. It's just like, what are they for? Oh, just to fix my fags when they snap, that's a' you need to say

This dynamic between young people and the rest of the community is the second issue which seemed to be of particular significance for many of the Muirbank participants, particularly the girls. Some feel that they are unfairly excluded from other community facilities which on the face of it exist to serve the whole community, but in practice, exercise policies which result in young people being denied access:

- Int** Can you tell me about the last time you had a really crap time?  
**Bridget (13)** Last week when we had nothing to do - not at the youth club, but like when I was out with my friends and there was nothing to do so we just went to Albino Centre (local sports centre) and we got chucked out there. They chucked us out because they said we were being too loud and then we went to the park and we took Julie's dogs for a walk - and that was quite boring
- Int** Right. And you were saying before that when you hang about in a big crowd that's kind of seen as a problem - who sees that as a problem?  
**Briony (14)** The community, like  
**Babs (14)** Yeah, everybody  
**Briony** If the police come down, it's like, move on - well, like, move on to where? I mean where are we meant to go?  
**Babs** Or they'll say, all go home, look, what are you doing here, and all that  
**Briony** But where else are we meant to go? There's nowhere else to go at all - the Sports Centre shuts after a certain time  
**Babs** Yeah, and they chuck you out if you're too big a crowd  
**Briony** And they chuck you out if you're not, like, doing a sport  
**Babs** But you should be able to buy stuff at the café  
**Briony** And it should be cheaper

Some of the girls also feel that both existing leisure facilities and future plans for building new ones are geared towards boys' interests rather than their own. Perhaps the local council may have a deliberate policy of targeting resources at boys whom they consider to be higher risk in terms of their potential for getting sucked into anti-social activity. The flip side of this coin, though, is increasing resentment on the part of girls who may feel that their own interests and voices are being ignored:

- Int** So, what would need to happen for things to be more fun?  
**Bex (14)** I don't know - something to do  
**Brenda (14)** Anything  
**Bex** The boys have got that, em, Beta bike track or something  
**Brenda** Where's that?  
**Bex** Skating place  
**Brenda** I didn't even know about it

- Bridget (13)** Yeah, like the council - they've decided to build a skatepark - they haven't asked us what we think
- Barbara (14)** They're spending £300,000 on something that probably won't be used
- Bridget** My brother's a skater and all his friends are but that doesn't mean that all the younger people are. There's only like, ten people in our year that are, that would actually use the park. Other people would just go there to hang out and it would just be another place to hang out on the streets
- Barbara** So, instead, they could put £300,000 towards, say a community centre - I know that wouldn't build a community centre but it would at least keep it

So some local spaces may be gendered, in so far as they appear to prioritise boys' interests at the expense of girls'. Having to conform to adult-defined norms of behaviour in order to be granted access to 'adult-oriented' community facilities also effectively means that the youth club is the only resource available to most young people in Muirbank. In the absence of other facilities, many young people resort to 'hanging out' - an activity which also brings them into conflict with the police, sometimes apparently with scant justification. The youth club itself may be under threat, perhaps partly as a result of the excessive drinking culture that the regular discos seem to encourage. Given this scenario, it is not surprising that many young people appear to feel that they are in a 'no-win' situation:

- Briony (14)** Yeah, see the council didn't realise, they were going to close this group down and everything and they wanted to stop all the discos but they're the ones that are saying that they don't want us to be out on the streets and vandalising and committing crimes and everything and getting drunk, all the stuff like that - they like, they're trying to stop us from doing that, but at the same time they're taking away, like the only things that we've got to do here, so what else have we left to do? Its quite annoying

### **Muirbank - a semi-rural backwater?**

The third aspect of local life in Muirbank which appears to be of particular significance to the participants in this study is its semi-rural location and the constraints that this imposes on some of those who live there. As noted by one of the participants in an earlier extract, Muirbank itself is better off than many of its smaller, more rural neighbours. Only two participants talked about living in a neighbouring village and their account is consistent with this sentiment. For these participants, a mile makes a lot of difference, effectively confining them to home-



based leisure pursuits. They seem to particularly rely on T.V. and access to the internet for their entertainment:

- Int** Right, so how do you make your own excitement, then, if there's nothing to do?
- Brenda (14)** I don't do very much actually
- Bex (14)** Well, we live outside Muirbank so we don't do anything
- Brenda** I stay at home most of the time
- Bex** Watch T.V. programmes
- Int** Right, so are you stuck away out in the countryside, then?
- Bex** About a mile outside Muirbank
- Brenda** If I do go out, I usually like go to a friend's house or something and play there
- Int** Can you tell me about the last time you had a really rubbish time?
- Brenda (14)** Eh, what night is it tonight - Wednesday, yesterday was Tuesday, it was Monday night, I didn't do anything - sat in the house
- Bex (14)** Last night. I broke the computer, so I couldn't get on the internet, so I was bored
- Int** Uhu, so do you use the internet a lot, then?
- Bex** Yeah, there's nothing else
- Brenda** I go on the internet a lot, but I don't do very much, I just sort of turn it on and leave it there
- Bex** And go to chat lines and stuff like that
- Int** Do you?
- Brenda** I can't get onto the chat lines - my dad's sorted out the parental control thing so I can't get on them
- Bex** My mum doesn't know how to do that, so that's quite handy

But, for some participants, life in Muirbank itself was experienced in a constraining way. The expense of bus fares added to the cost of an activity seem to be outwith the ordinary budget of many young people, making a trip into town an occasional treat:

- Int** So, how do you make your own excitement if a lot of the time there's nothing happening?
- Briony (14)** Just, cinema (laugh)
- Babs (14)** Or you go out and you rent a video and you have loads of folk round
- Briony** But it's hard going up to the cinema so much because
- Babs** It costs so much money
- Briony** You're paying £2.26 return for the bus
- Babs** And MacDonalds
- Briony** And then you're paying £4.60 to get in
- Babs** Because it's one of the facts about going up to the cinema

- Briony** So you're spending so much money - I think the buses should be cheaper
- Babs** I've not been up to the cinema in ages - the cinema should be cheaper
- Briony** Yeah. And there should be cards or something that you get on the bus. Because at Christmas they had 70p return and that was so good

For others, restrictions relating to life in Muirbank appear to extend beyond day-to-day concerns to include a broader vision of the kind of life they would like to have. From this perspective, living in Muirbank has a 'trapped' quality to it and offers very little in terms of more cosmopolitan pursuits:

- Int** What's it like living here in Muirbank?
- Britney (13)** Well, everybody else seems to like it, but I don't like living here
- Int** Uhu
- Britney** It's just a personal feeling, 'cause I don't know why, I just don't really like it. I want to get more out of, travel about, so I feel like I'm sort of stuck here, so that's why I don't like it
- Billie (13)** Well I do like the place and everything but it's just that there's not much for us to do really - there isn't a lot for us to do. I would really like to move to Glasgow or somewhere where I could get out more and go shopping and stuff 'cause there's not that much stuff to do here, so. I generally like the place and everything, but

According to these accounts, then, life in Muirbank presents particular challenges for the young people who live there. Being bored and having nothing to do is part of a discourse shared by most young people at this stage in their lives, but it does seem to have a particular resonance in this community, given the real shortage of facilities for young people. It would be misleading to assume that young people perceive and experience local life in purely negative terms, however. Some people value the relative safety of the community as an advantage, for example, and others recognise that they are a lot better off than more remote, neighbouring villages. Nonetheless, some young people apparently take to the streets as a result of the dearth of activities, and the regular youth club disco, the high point of many young people's social calendar, has become a focus for excessive drinking and other substance use, particularly among the boys. To make matters worse, it would appear that other community facilities impose what young people perceive as unreasonable rules and standards of behaviour, making it difficult for them to access these resources. As we have seen, though, young people experience and respond to these locality constraints in different ways. Some, particularly girls, appear to enjoy socialising within broad family and friendship networks and to have greater access to material resources which afford them a greater degree of freedom. Some are also channelling their

efforts in a positive way, working with youth club leaders to try to preserve existing resources and develop new initiatives for young people in the town. A very different scenario prevails in Pentland, the other community which is the subject of this chapter, and it is to the accounts of young people living here that this chapter now turns.

### **Pentland - a bastion of territorialism?**

One key theme suffused all of the accounts of the Pentland participants - that of territorialism. This is not a new dynamic, it has been around for many years, and despite the best efforts of local youth workers and community leaders to break down these barriers, data from this study suggest that they still have an impact on young people's lives. As we have already seen with the Muirbank participants, however, there are variations in how young people in Pentland relate to the territorialism that still appears to pervade the area. As we shall see, for some young people it is to some degree a stigmatising and constraining influence, but for others, it is a dynamic with which they are sucked in. For some of these young people, their involvement can reasonably be explained in terms of boredom. For others, though, there are additional attractions which are perhaps more difficult both to explain and address. The remainder of this chapter will present these data and will then conclude by summarising what these tell us about how factors operating at a local level may influence young people's health related beliefs and behaviour, in particular their cannabis use.

Most of the Pentland participants spoke during the course of their interview about local fights between rival gangs. Some introduced this issue themselves in the context of general questioning about their local area and how they spend their time, others talked about it in response to a specific question. The main manifestation of the territorial atmosphere that continues to pervade Pentland is fighting between rival gangs and, as noted earlier, when these fights occur, they have the potential to constrain the movements of other young people. Sometimes organised activities have to be cancelled and it would appear that in some cases, affected areas are off-limits not just to young people, but also to the police:

- Int** So, first of all, what's it like living here - how do you like living in this area?
- Natasha (15)** Well, it's a' right, but sometimes, there's, like, quite a bit of trouble with the police with a' the fighting
- Naomi (15)** The gangs

**Natasha** Sometimes they cannae get down here because of a' the fighting and the club has to be called off, but

But young people's movements are not only restricted because of clubs being cancelled. Some feel uneasy about being around particular areas at certain times and may even choose to pursue the precautionary measure of avoiding these areas:

**Int** People have told me that sometimes there's fights?

**Nik (13)** Aye

**Int** Between different gangs - is that something that goes on?

**Nik** Backton and Stonehall - yeah, gangs, sometimes Righthouse

**Norris (16)** Aye, me and my dad were walking along the road and we seen this big gang chucking bricks

**Int** Yeah? Does that make it a bit difficult, being out and about?

**Nik** Aye, like about 7 o'clock a' the gangs go up the chippie bit and I don't like walking past that bit sometimes

In addition to young people's lives being subject to restrictions because of local gang fighting, the general climate of violence that seems to pervade the area also appears to have a stigmatising effect. So some young people shy away from disclosing details of where they live:

**Int** O.K, so what's it like living in this area, first of all?

**Nicola (15)** Well, it's quite bad. People are, it's really noisy and there's always loads of vandalism and stuff. If you go to places like my auntie's house, which is, like, the other side of Edinburgh, and it's much nicer and then you come back to my house and it's like, oh, quite embarrassing to tell people my address sometimes

In Pentland, though, it seems that gang fights are not confined to the streets - they are also an occasional feature of school life, although in this context, they may be fuelled by sectarian rather than geographical tensions. Some schools, it would seem, are forced to resort to a fortress mentality as a way of managing this violence, but this response also carries a heavy cost, not only in terms of an ugly school building, but also in terms of damage to the quality of the social dimension of the educational experience:

**Int** Right, O.K., tell me about school, what's school like?

**Norris (16)** Em, school isnae bad - bit of a dump. Apart from that, it's like a prison

**Int** Is it?

**Norris** It's got electric mesh fences all round it, gates an' a' that - at break, cannae go oot or nothing. The only time you can go out is lunch, and there's still fights then wi' other schools an' that



**Nik (13)** That's right, 'cause there's a school over the road from us, not even a mile away  
**Norris** It's no' a mile away - ten minutes  
**Nik** Not even a mile  
**Int** Uhu, so is there rivalry between the two schools?  
**Norris** Aye, its like a catholic, protestant thing  
**Int** Right, so that goes on, does it?  
**Nik** Aye  
**Norris** And sometimes, like, other schools come down to fight us  
**Nik** Aye, Woodburn, they come doon sometimes, last time was three or four weeks, something like that  
**Norris** Aye, and they were launching bricks and one just missed the headteacher

It would be misleading to assume, though, that rival gang fights and their effects have consigned these participants to a wholly restricting and confining social life. This is not the case, and most appear to have found ways of enjoying community life in spite of these constraints. Much of this seems to be down to their ability and willingness to take advantage of the wide range of opportunities that are available locally. Drama clubs, youth leadership training, fund-raising for trips away, and other youth work-led initiatives are just some of the activities these participants talked about, as well as more family-oriented pursuits. For many other local young people, however, these sorts of activity do not appear to hold the same appeal and it is these participants who appear to relate to the territorialism of the area in very different ways.

### **Cannabis, street life and gang fights**

For some young people, taking part in skirmishes with rival gangs appears to form a routine part of their leisure activity, much of which seems to be spent roaming the streets in large groups. In this context, young people belonging to rival gangs seem to both initiate and come under attack from rival groupings:

**Int** Right, so what do you like doing, how do you spend your free time and that?  
**Nicol (15)** Playing fitba'  
**Nils (14)** Hash  
**Nicol** Smoking hash, going off to fights  
**Int** Right, folk have said to me that there's quite a lot of rival gang fights  
**Nicol** Territorial, aye  
**Int** Yeah, so is that something that goes on quite a lot?  
**Nicol** Aye  
**Nils** Aye

**Int** Right, so you were saying that you spend quite a lot of time just hanging about Backton?

**Norrie (15)** Aye

**Int** Is it big groups of you or just a few of you?

**Neil (15)** There's fifteen to twenty

**Int** Oh, right

**Neil** Just stand on a corner, sort of

**Norrie** Mostly, like, we go up to the park, an' that, the schemy hooses, an' that - we usually fight them

**Int** What was that?

**Norrie** We usually fight wi' them

**Int** Is this another gang?

**Norrie** Aye

**Int** So is there quite a lot of that, then, rivalry?

**Norrie** Aye, it's been quiet, well, lately

**Neil** It's been quiet, but

**Int** Right

**Neil** A couple of days ago we were passing and they a' started to throw bottles an' that, we were passing on our bikes, nearly got us

As noted earlier, though, there are apparent variations amongst this group of young people who engage in these street based cultures. For some, it would appear that boredom is the main motivation. These participants do not appear to have a strong affinity with the local area and have aspirations to move towards more constructive lifestyles. These particular participants tended to be older, and some were actively pursuing this goal by accessing the support of a local youth worker who is helping them to take advantage of work experience opportunities:

**Int** So, do you know what you fancy doing when you're a wee bit older?

**Neil (15)** I wanted tae dae building, bricklaying an' that, but, 'cause I put a list to Jane (youth worker) of what I was wanting for work experience and joinery was about third in the list and I got that, I dinnae really want tae dae it, I dinnae really like it, but I'll just dae it

**Nash (15)** I'd like to dae a trade, eh, that gies ye mair money, get your ain business and that

**Int** Oh, right

**Norrie (15)** I'm daeing mechanics, eh, and if I think its good, I'll want to stick to that

So these participants, although still occasionally involved in rival gang fights and other features of street life, did appear to be looking beyond Pentland towards newer, and more conventional horizons. Other young people also talked about their involvement in the various activities of street life as a way of relieving boredom and making things happen:

**Int** So, how come you moved on to buying your own (cannabis)?  
**Nils (14)** Dinnae ken, noo we're at it every night (laugh)  
**Nicol (15)** Well, it's just like, there's nothing else tae dae, right, and you just a' chip in and you usually get a tenner and you can go for a smoke. It's something tae dae, and it's like another shite night, you get stoned to get a laugh, so we just dae it

But these participants seemed to have a very different relationship with the notoriety associated with these kinds of territorial behaviours. In particular, they seemed to derive social benefit and a sense of positive identification with these aspects of local life. This is evident in the accounts of two sets of participants as they describe their reaction to newspaper coverage of anti-social behaviour in their affiliated community. Their contribution in helping to establish Stonehall's bad reputation appears to be a source of pride and amusement to them:

**Int** So do you think it's something that goes on in other parts of Edinburgh - not just Stonehall?  
**Neal (14)** Aye, in the paper the other day, it was describing, it had an article about Edinburgh youths and the hash an' that and it described Edinburgh - it had Edinburgh Castle, Princes Street, em  
**Nathan (13)** Stonehall  
**Neal** Stonehall hash gang, then it had the Royal Mile or something and it was describing another place, it was describing that, it had another comment about it and then something else  
**Int** Right, so what does it feel like, hearing stories like that about, you know saying stuff like that about Stonehall?  
**Neal (14)** You're like, wow, that's us - that's us daein' that  
**Nathan** Ye cannae believe you're daein' that - ye ken, only 13 years old and I'm daein' all this

**Int** So, do you think there's any difference between folk that use hash and folk that don't?  
**Nils (14)** Naw  
**Nicol (15)** 'Cause they dinnae use it, they call us junkies. Most folk in Stonehall use it  
**Int** Right, is it quite common here?  
**Nicol** Aye  
**Nils** Oh aye  
**Nicol** Even in the Daily Record, they had it in the Daily Record  
**Nils** Aye, I know - Stonehall youth  
**Nicol** Stonehall youth  
**Int** Right, was it an article in the Daily Record, then? So, what's it like reading about where you live in the papers and that?  
**Nicol** Funny (laugh)

So for some young people, certain social benefits may accrue from their involvement in street life, and in particular, territorial violence. Living in a certain part of the community seems to confer an identity which some young people feel a strong identification with. But it is not only those who actively engage with rival gangs in this way who are at risk of violent attack - simply being a 'Stonehaller' or a 'Backtoner' in the wrong place at the wrong time apparently makes a young person fair game:

**Int** So, what about all these fights that go on in the area, then, folk have told me about them - are you involved in that at all?

**Neal (14)** Aye, we have fights

**Nathan (13)** My brother just got jumped by the Backtoners, eh, on Monday

**Neal** The ambulance was outside

**Int** Was it?

**Nathan** Aye, the ambulance came for somebody else

**Neal** I thought it was maybe for him

**Int** Oh dear, is he all right?

**Nathan** Aye, he's a' right, he's fine, he's just got a couple of bumps and bruises, his face is all scraped

**Int** So, is that quite a common thing?

**Nathan** Aye, just if you get caught

**Neal** You'll get a good kicking off the lot of them

**Int** What, just because you live in a certain area?

**Neal** It would be the exact same if we were to catch one of them, we widnae show any pity. It's no' the fact that - sometimes you cannae help it if you're a Stonehaller, em, like, you're a Stonehaller but you dinnae fight - and you get caught, they dinnae show any pity

**Nathan** They just batter you

**Neal** They just batter you

**Int** So, what would happen if you didnae get into all of that?

**Neal** It disnae matter - they'd still batter you. If you're classed as a Stonehaller, there's nothing you can really dae about it

Another interesting aspect of the relationship between street life, substance use and territorial violence is that different areas seem to be associated with different patterns of drug use. A general consensus appeared across the participants' accounts that Backton is primarily associated with cannabis, while Stonehall is linked with heavier forms of drug use, primarily among the adult population. Those young people who themselves live in Stonehall also held this view, although they distanced themselves from heavy drug use:

**Nick (14)** I would say Backton's bad for the hash, man, but Stonehall is bad for the

**Neville (13)** For the drugs, the big drugs



**Int** Right  
**Neville** Like, you see in Stonehall, you can walk past, you can walk like ten yards and there's somebody, like, deid, an' that, I'm sure, half-deid  
**Int** Yeah?  
**Nick** Away wi' it

**Int** Do you think it's (cannabis) more or less harmful than other stuff?  
**Neal (14)** Less, I think cannabis is only a Class C drug, is it?  
**Int** Class B, I think - the highest is A - like heroin, and  
**Neal** Heroin and smack, cocaine  
**Nathan (13)** Aye, I widnae try any of that, like  
**Neal** Neither would I

So far, all of the accounts of those young people who engage in territorial violence come from boys, but it would be a mistake to assume that this is solely a male preserve. Some girls do appear to be involved to some degree, although it is possible that they play a largely passive, peripheral role in these skirmishes. Their involvement may be more to do with hanging out with the boys, something these participants talked about elsewhere in their account, than with actively instigating and pursuing fights with rival gangs for its own sake:

**Int** So you were saying you were fighting with the Righouse folk at that point, yeah? Is that something that happens quite a lot?  
**Nat (14)** Depends on the Backtoners now  
**Niamh (13)** Like the Righousers and the Stonehalls, like, are in one big team and everywhere we go there's, like, a car in front of us with Righousers and Backtoners - and we saw a' the laddies an' a' that  
**Nat** Last week we were in Backton and a' the team fae the Stonehall end ran into us and trapped us. I eventually got away  
**Niamh** And a car passed wi' Righousers in it, stopped and pure just sat staring at us  
**Nat** 'Cause a' the Backtoners and Righousers are older and the've got cars and motor-bikes, so we cannae get them

Constraints associated with this study sample make it difficult to assess the nature of girls' involvement in incidents of territorial violence. Of the twenty Pentland participants, only five were girls and only the two quoted above appeared to play a role in street-based leisure cultures. Several of the male participants seemed to implicate girls in these rival gang fights but the only effective way of shedding further light on this issue would be to interview more girls who spend much of their leisure time in this way.

While this chapter appears to have highlighted a particular link between street life, territorial violence and cannabis use, it would be misleading to assume that all boys who engage in street-based leisure cultures are also, by extension, cannabis users. Although this was mostly the case in the context of this study, there was one exception. One boy talked about brief experimentation with both tobacco and cannabis but reported that he no longer engages in these behaviours while many of his peers continue to do so. His mother and older brother also routinely use cannabis and yet in spite of this degree of exposure, he seems to have made a decision not to use these substances, at least at this point in his life. A number of factors may help to explain this. Unlike his male cannabis using peers, Norman seems to feel a sense of belonging to his neighbourhood and to engage with this in positive ways. He also seems to have constructive ways of using his leisure time:

- Int** Just some general stuff first, Norman. Can I ask you what it's like living here in Backton? What do you think about it?
- Norman (14)** It's good
- Int** Uhu, what's good about it?
- Norman** The people and that are good, and you get on wi' them and it's a good community. And, just, like when you're no' at school, the youth club always gives you something tae dae
- Int** Are you down here a lot, then?
- Norman** Nearly every day, aye

Norman's account is also unusual in terms of the way he talks about his father's influence on his behaviour. At first glance, part of his account seems contradictory because he talks both about enjoying his experience of trying cannabis but also about not experiencing any effects at all. Perhaps, though, his enjoyment was rooted in aspects other than the physiological effects, for example, sharing a group experience with peers. He seems quite clear, however, that any benefits are outweighed by the risk of his father finding out about his cannabis use. He returns to this theme several times during the course of the interview and it seems likely that this dynamic is a significant influence on his behaviour. It would appear that his sense of community and constructive use of leisure time, and his father's strong influence, work together to differentiate this participant from the rest of his peers:

- Int** Right, hash - do you mind me asking you if you've tried that at all?
- Norman (14)** I've tried it
- Int** Uhu, can you tell me what that was like?
- Norman** I liked it actually but, then again my dad told me no' tae smoke, eh, so I didnae dae it
- Int** So, why did you try it at that particular time?

**Norman** Just, 'cause, like people go on about how good an effect it gies ye and that so I thought, well I'm going to try it and see if it does gie ye a good effect. And it didnae gie me any effect at all, so, there was nae point in keeping on daein it, eh, if it's no' going to gie ye any effect. Nae point in getting caught for nothing, eh? Nae point in getting caught wi' ma dad for nothing

This part of the chapter has shown that for many of the Pentland participants, occasional rival gang fights fuelled by a territorial atmosphere is a significant feature of their local area. Not everyone experiences this in the same way, however. Some young people manage to transcend the constraints that this violence occasionally imposes on their lives by drawing upon a range of community resources as well as their friendship and family networks. Not all young people, though, value or have access to these networks and resources. Others, predominantly those heavily involved in street-based leisure cultures, actively engage with this rivalry, some out of boredom, others with additional motives relating to the social benefits which may accrue from affiliation and loyalty to a particular gang. For these young people, involvement in a range of potentially health damaging behaviours also seems to be part and parcel of the whole experience. There are encouraging signs that some of the older boys may be moving on from the worst excesses of these behaviours, but it would appear that some of the younger boys, and possibly some girls too, remain stuck in this unhealthy territorial dynamic to the detriment of their health and future prospects.

### **Muirbank and Pentland compared**

This chapter has explored the relative impact on young people's health related behaviours of the experience of living in two very different communities. On the face of it, these two communities appear to be very different in a number of important respects. While Muirbank is a relatively small, self-contained, semi-rural market town in the east of Scotland, Pentland is a large, sprawling urban area comprising several continuous neighbourhoods with a legacy of social problems, particularly drug abuse, mainly in the adult population. Because of its relative levels of deprivation, substantial resources have been poured into Pentland which now enjoys a wide range of local facilities serving the whole community, young people in particular. The young people in Muirbank, on the other hand, only have access to one local youth club and many appear to find their movements constrained by the costs of local transport. So, what bearing might these apparent differences have on young people's health related behaviours?

Participants' accounts seem to suggest that the level of organised provision for young people has a significant bearing on health related behaviour - but its impact may be mediated by other factors. In Muirbank, the monthly disco - apparently the only opportunity for young people to socialise together in this way - seems to have become a focus for excessive drinking, and for some young people, other substance use as well. According to some accounts, this has antagonised some adult sections of the local community who would like to see the discos stopped altogether. Young people themselves seem to feel that if there were more social events, there would be less need for young people to engage in excessive behaviours. The experience of Pentland, however, seems to show that even when young people have access to a wide range of facilities, they do not necessarily take advantage of this. The territorial dynamic which characterises the Pentland area seems to ensure that to some extent at least, young people tend to restrict their movements to their immediate environment. For some young people, this is about avoiding potential trouble, for others, an engagement with this dynamic appears to foster certain social benefits, in particular a sense of identification with a particular neighbourhood. Of course, whether young people live in an urban or a rural environment, there will always be those who value and prefer adult-free, unsupervised leisure time, and this is another factor which may constrain the extent to which young people use local resources. According to some Muirbank participants, access to resources designed to serve the whole community can also be problematic for young people who are expected to conform to adult defined rules and standards of behaviour.

It would appear, then, that these two communities are different in a number of respects and these differences may help to shape how young people spend their time. However, these differences do not necessarily translate into different patterns of health behaviours amongst the young people who live there. Some young people in Muirbank - but not others - seem to avoid excessive involvement in risk behaviours in much the same way as the Pentland participants. Factors such as attitudes and preferences about leisure, and how this relates to self-image, access to material resources, and engagement with aspects of community life all seem to be of some salience. In this way, aspects of participants' individual trajectories interact with factors operating at a local neighbourhood level to both shape, and be shaped by, young people's health related beliefs and behaviours.



## **Summary**

This chapter has argued that factors relating to locality may play a role in how young people experience life in a particular community. This, in turn, may affect how young people spend their leisure time and may also contribute to shaping aspects of their health-related beliefs and behaviour. In highlighting differences both between and within areas this chapter has also shown how young people may experience and respond to aspects of locality in different ways. In trying to more fully understand the role of cannabis in young people's lives, it is therefore important to develop our awareness of how factors operating at a local neighbourhood level interact with other factors to shape health related beliefs and behaviour.

**Introduction**

As we have seen in previous chapters, young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviours are shaped by factors operating at a range of levels. We have seen, for example, how older siblings may act as lay informants about cannabis and how young people's cannabis use appears to be particularly associated with street-based leisure cultures. Looking beyond these social contexts, this chapter will explore how aspects of broader culture may affect young people's relationship with cannabis. As discussed in some detail in the literature review, drug misuse, in particular the debate surrounding cannabis regulation, is a topic which excites widespread public debate and is never far from the media spotlight. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many participants in this study expressed their views on this contentious issue. The topic came up in two thirds of the interviews, usually in the context of a discussion about whether cannabis use is likely to become more common or when comparing cannabis with cigarette smoking. In almost all instances, participants themselves introduced the specific topic of cannabis control and it seems reasonable to conclude that this is an issue of some salience to them. The accounts referred exclusively to 'legalisation' rather than any other potential legal changes such as reclassification or decriminalisation. Since the interviews were conducted a year or so before the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, announced his intention in 2002 to reclassify cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug, this is probably not surprising and simply reflects the public prominence of 'legalisation' as the dominant factor in this debate. Their accounts, in fact, provide few clues as to their awareness and understanding of the range of legal changes possible, nor the distinctions between them.

As noted earlier, cannabis has seldom been out of the news in the past few years and the subject has received particular attention in Scotland as the result of a campaign by the Big Issue magazine which subsequently sparked off a debate in the Scottish parliament. This is a policy issue which up until now has largely excluded young people's perspectives so this discussion has the potential to shed new light on this important area. Relatively few studies have explored young people's views on cannabis deregulation. A recent exception is the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey which includes data on attitudes to illegal drugs. Data from this survey show the level of support for legalising cannabis to be closely linked with age, with 62% of 18-24 year olds, but less than 40% of those aged 45-65+ favouring legalisation, although with some controls (McKeganey, 2001). We know virtually nothing,

however, about what younger teenagers feel about this issue, so findings from this study will build on these existing data.

This chapter, then, will begin by presenting data relating to participants' views on cannabis regulation. It will argue that many young people appear to favour a change in the law (as it stood at the time of interview). Most of these accounts, however, reflect a measured, although sometimes ambiguous, approach to legal reform and young people drew upon a range of arguments to support their views. As noted earlier, discussion of this topic was mostly initiated by participants themselves. A new analytical category was therefore developed at an early stage to reflect participants' interest in this theme and a question was included in subsequent interviews when the issue was not raised by participants themselves. An analysis of these data revealed three broad positions on the issue of cannabis control. Some participants favoured a relaxation in the law - but only for medical purposes. Others advocated a change in relation to 'recreational' use, while some, on balance, supported the status quo. The participants themselves do not use the term 'recreational' and it is used in the context of this discussion simply as a way of differentiating between young people's use of cannabis in a social context, on the one hand, and its use in alleviating physical symptoms in a medical context, on the other. It remains an ill-defined concept, though, and this is problematic for this analysis of young people's views on cannabis control because it means that it is far from clear if all young people are talking about the same thing. As we shall see, some accounts do provide more differentiation than others and this provides some clues about participants' views on what constitutes 'recreational' use and what the boundaries are between this and other patterns of use. Data relating to participants' attitudes to and experiences of police enforcement of current cannabis laws will also be discussed in this part of the chapter.

An additional theme, also mostly introduced by participants themselves, although on a lesser scale, explores young people's views on the influence of popular culture on young people's health related beliefs and behaviours. Two particular aspects arose in the data - the influence of role models and the impact of television advertising. Interview transcripts were also coded to include this theme and the second part of the chapter will explore participants' accounts relating to this topic. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary.

### **Cannabis reform - but only for medical purposes?**

Findings from this study suggest that most young people appear to favour a change in the cannabis laws. Participants drew upon a range of arguments to support their position and showed a keen awareness of many of the issues surrounding the wider public debate of which they are a part. Their accounts for the most part reflected a measured position, suggesting that any change in the law should also be accompanied by controls of some sort. Most of the thirty participants who raised the issue of legalisation had tried cannabis at some point. Only a few reported never having tried cannabis and these particular participants, perhaps not surprisingly, drew a distinction between the medical use of cannabis, on the one hand, and recreational use, on the other. These accounts were broadly in favour of a relaxation in the law, but only for therapeutic purposes. In the first extract, the participants describe a story-line from a popular T.V. drama in order to reinforce the logic of their argument that continuing to criminalise those who use cannabis for therapeutic purposes is unjust. Their account also highlights their concern about the potential social costs of acquiring a cannabis-related criminal record. This perhaps reflects their own career aspirations and, as we shall see later, the risk of becoming 'criminalised' for using cannabis was not a concern for all participants in this study:

- Barbara (14)** I think it's sort of - they should legalise it - but legalise it as a prescription for folk with multiple sclerosis
- Bridget (13)** Because it is a really good health thing
- Barbara** And if they think it helps them, well, the government, its O.K. for them to say we shouldn't legalise it but they're not the ones with multiple sclerosis
- Bridget** On the T.V. programme "Bad Girls", the girl in it who was in jail had that, and her friend tried to sneak in cannabis and she got an extra year in jail 'cause she was meant to go out, just 'cause she knew it would help her
- Barbara** 'Cause it's easy for them to say, oh, we'll charge you a hundred pounds if we find you with it
- Bridget** And put you in jail or whatever
- Barbara** I wouldn't have it - unless I was ill, like I had one of those diseases, but it's not worth it. Because once you have it, then it's down on your record and it's harder to find a job if you've got drugs on your record
- Bridget** Yeah, especially with jobs like a lawyer, which you want to be

Other participants also drew upon the media, this time the printed word, as a source of information on the issues surrounding cannabis control. As with the other account, they favour a change in the law which would make cannabis available to people who are ill through a doctor's prescription. They also draw attention to



another concern - the possible risk to young people's health posed by having to buy cannabis on the illegal black market. This view, though, does not seem to reflect the reality for the majority of young cannabis users who for the most part seem to obtain their supply from people who are known to them rather than from 'shady dealers':

- Brenda (14)** Oh, I've remembered. I think it was cannabis, right, but I'm not sure. But a lady in a magazine got her daughter to get it for her 'cause it was taking away pain or something like that, something like that anyway, it was taking away something
- Bex (14)** 'Cause, like, you can get it on prescription or something, like from the doctor
- Brenda** Yeah, something like that
- Int** Yes, it's supposed to help with pain relief for people that have got multiple sclerosis - is that what you're thinking about?
- Brenda** No, she didn't have that, but she had something that it helped with - and she got her daughter to buy it
- Int** What do you think about that, then, if it's used for those kind of purposes?
- Brenda** Well, if it was legal but prescribed from a doctor and like only allowed to take a certain amount, then I think that would be O.K.
- Bex** Yeah
- Brenda** But if you bought it, like, off the illegal market
- Bex** Like off the black market
- Brenda** 'Cause, like, if it's from a doctor, you'll know more what's in it and, like
- Bex** Like, 'cause if you buy it off the street or something, people could put other stuff in it and everything, and you wouldn't know
- Brenda** Yeah. I'm sure I heard of somebody, like, who'd sold an OXO cube crushed up and somebody bought it for about £20 (laugh)

### **Legal reforms to allow 'recreational' cannabis use?**

Many, but not all, of the participants who themselves use or have used cannabis appeared to advocate a relaxation in the law which would allow cannabis to be used for recreational purposes. In most cases, these accounts did not specifically mention cannabis in a medical context, although it seems likely that their support for cannabis reform would also encompass this type of use. Some of these accounts drew upon a comparison between the potential social consequences of alcohol and cannabis as their main justification for supporting cannabis reform. While not mentioning alcohol explicitly, it seems clear that the next account is arguing that while alcohol has the potential to make young people aggressive, cannabis is more likely to mellow you out:

**Int** Some folk say, oh, there's that many folk using it nowadays that it's just kind of normal - what do you reckon?

**Nicol (15)** I wouldnae go that far

**Nils (14)** They should legalise it

**Nicol** Aye, I think they should legalise it - 'cause it disnae make you want to fight

**Nils** Sometimes

**Int** So what does it make you feel like, then?

**Nils** Happy

**Nicol** Happy, lazy

**Nils** Really makes you laugh

**Nicol** Anything that makes you laugh is guid

Another account suggests that in certain circumstances, cannabis may actually promote social cohesion within a peer group:

**Int** Right, so why do you do it, what do you get out of it?

**Nathan (13)** It's just a laugh

**Neal (14)** Some, its good, it gives you good things to remember - when somebody does something - falls or you get a good laugh, somebody seriously cops a munchie and you're in stitches. Or like, when we were slagging our pal - I mean that was good, that was a good time

**Nathan** 'Cause he was laughing himself

**Neal** He was even laughing himself - he was like laughing at him getting slagged

These 'romanticised' versions of the positive effects of using cannabis, however, were matched by other, more critical accounts which suggested a very different story. Some accounts, for example, challenged the common association between cannabis and non-violence:

**Int** Any bad sides to it (cannabis)?

**Neville (13)** Aye, when you're pure gouching, man (laugh) and everybody's taking the pish oot ye. And then, if you're, some people, like, get like they have to eat and some people laugh and some people just get aggressive, eh, and then you're fighting wi' your ain mates an' that, aboot it, ken what I mean

**Nick (14)** See like when you're stoned an' that, your pals an' that, people who dinnae smoke it, just sit and stare at you, like

**Neville** Pretend they're shaking an' that

**Nick** And they shake trying to make a fool of you an' that

**Neville** You're seeing them shaking an' that, just being dafties an' then if you take it aggressively, ken what I mean, you're gonnae fight wi' your ain mates an, that

- Int** Yeah, so does that sometimes happen, then, if folk are taking the piss like that?
- Neville** Aye, and you end up fighting wi' your ain mates an' that

Nonetheless, these participants also seem to advocate cannabis legalisation in a way that almost appears to blur the boundaries between recreational and therapeutic use. It is not clear what these participants mean when they refer to some people 'needing' cannabis. They seem to be alluding to some form of physical dependence, but there is also a suggestion of a social dimension. As we shall see in the next chapter, this ambiguity around issues of 'addiction' and 'dependence' in relation to cannabis is a theme which characterised many of the accounts in this study:

- Int** What do you think about legalisation?
- Neville (13)** I think it should be like, 'cause there's like a lot of people that need it, ken what I mean
- Nick (14)** And people pull their hair oot an' that
- Neville** Exactly, climb up the walls an' that for it, ken what I mean
- Nick** And sometimes if people don't have any hash, they just go a'
- Neville** For something tae dae, eh, just sit and have a joint

Some participants drew upon libertarian arguments, also present in public discourses, to justify their support for cannabis legalisation. According to this perspective, individuals are responsible for their own actions and the state should not become involved in matters of personal morality. In the next account, Norman attempts to further consolidate his view with another argument which has been central not only to the pro-cannabis lobby, but also to the government's case in the recent reclassification decision - the argument that cannabis reform will free up judicial resources to tackle more serious crime:

- Norman (14)** But, you see now they're trying to legalise it, cannabis and stuff like that, I think they will dae it eventually
- Int** What do you think about that?
- Norman** I think they should, aye
- Int** How come?
- Norman** I think they should just let people be free tae dae what they want, eh N it's their lives, it's them that are knackerin themselves up, know what I mean? So if the law just let them get on with it, 'cause they're daein it behind their back anyway, so. So if the law just let them get on with it, an' that, and then maybe the polis wouldn't have to work so long and there wouldnae be so many places in the jail stuck up an' that, eh. Ken, they wouldnae have to send people away to Hawick an' that just because they cannae get drug dealers into the jail

Other participants drew a distinction between the legal position relating to consumption, on the one hand, and cultivation and supply, on the other. The participants in the following account also advocate a system of age limits which would 'protect' younger people, although they acknowledge that such a system, in their view at least, is already applied in an inconsistent way across the range of young people's substance use. This is a particularly intriguing position to adopt, given that their own cannabis use would remain illegal, since both are currently aged fifteen. Taking into account their experience with a range of other drugs, including ecstasy and solvents, it may be that they see themselves as somehow more 'street-wise' and less in need of protection than other young people their age. From this perspective, it may be that they view such age limits as a flexible guideline rather than a rigid ruling:

- Bret (15)** Aye, I'm going to Amsterdam for a week  
**Bruce (15)** But I think hash should be legalised but watched when its legalised, like  
**Bret** Nae growing it but you can smoke it  
**Bruce** No little children and no selling it if you want, you only sell it to over 18's  
**Bret** 16, 16 or over  
**Bruce** 16's 'cause you're, like you're not going to give it to wee laddies  
**Bret** Aye, that's the only thing I dinnae get, eh though, you're allowed to smoke when you're 16, and that's like killing you, but you're no' allowed to buy drink till you're 18 which is just really gonnae  
**Bruce** Pickle your liver  
**Bret** Put a belly on you. It's gonnae take a lot longer for the drink to damage you than the cigarettes, ken

A few other participants also drew a comparison between the legal situation in the UK and in other European countries. These accounts were more ambiguous than those already discussed and they seemed to express some concerns about how such a change may work in the Scottish context. Some participants seem worried that any relaxation in the law runs the risk of promoting a 'normalising' culture which, in turn, may lead to more widespread use. This response, to one of the cards used in the 'agree-disagree' stimulus exercise, suggests that from these participants' perspectives, the current law has a deterrent effect which would be lost if such a change were implemented:

- Int** Cannabis use will never be as common as cigarette smoking among young people?  
**Darren (15)** Nah, it will be one day



**Damien (15)** Aye, it will be one day  
**Darren** A lot of folk'll start it  
**Damien** Like in Holland it's like, 'cause they're all soul people  
**Darren** If it becomes legal it will. A lot of folk will do it  
**Damien** Aye, 'cause its like a medicine  
**Darren** 'Cause then the police can't do anything. They can't come up and arrest you for it. So they will do it

Some participants also seemed confused about what a change in the law would mean in terms of how cannabis would be supplied and they appear to be in two minds about whether or not legalisation would be a good thing:

**Rob (13)** I wannae go to Geneva, or Amsterdam, that's where its legalised and you can walk about the streets wi' a joint and you can stand next to a polis guy wi' a joint  
**Ray (13)** They're trying to get cannabis legalised here an' that  
**Int** What do you think about that?  
**Rob** Aye, then you get persuaded an' that  
**Ray** Wouldnae buy it  
**Rob** You'd be able to get it at the doctor's an' that - a half ounce an' that  
**Ray** You'd just buy it in the shops and they'd have to save up and  
**Rob** See in Amsterdam an' that, ken, you get chocolate sprinkles - you get hash sprinkles on your cones an' that  
**Int** Right  
**Rob** Have a yoghurt wi' hash in it

### **Arguments against legalisation**

As we have seen, some participants clearly support reform which would allow cannabis to be used in a therapeutic context. Others advocate legalisation for recreational purposes, although with some controls. Only a few participants who expressed a view on this issue presented arguments which on balance were opposed to reform. We might have expected that those who expressed this alternative view would be non-cannabis users. Without any personal experience to draw upon, such participants may be more likely to be influenced by public discourses which oppose illicit drug use in any form. Confounding this expectation, however, these opinions were actually expressed by cannabis users themselves. These accounts did have an ambivalent quality about them, though, which may reflect a weighing up process informed by a mix of external influences and personal experience. One account is clearly grounded in the participants' experience of living in a stigmatised community with a history of drug problems. A major concern for these two participants is that local shopkeepers are likely to exploit any change in the law to boost their profits,

and that the cheap and easy availability of cannabis sold in single joints may lead to more widespread use among young people. There is a strong theme of 'rights and responsibilities' running through this account, particularly in Rose's reflections. In an unusual twist, she uses her future role as a mother as her frame of reference for devising what she considers to be a reasonable framework for exercising parental authority on the cannabis issue:

- Int** Right, let's see, we've nearly covered everything, I think. So do you think, going back to hash again, do you think it's something that's kind of more accepted than it used to be?
- Robert (14)** Uhu
- Rose (15)** Aye. And I think that they're going to legalise it and it's gonnae become a big trouble. That's what I was saying, ken, we'll end up, ken, some shops an' that will sell, say like a joint an' that, like the shop doon the street an' that, I think that's what'll happen. 'Cause then that's how they'll make their money
- Robert** They are going to legalise it. I'm pretty sure that they will - I dinnae ken how long, but they will legalise it at yin time
- Int** And do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?
- Rose** Just as long as it's lightly used. And it disnae bother us or our families - if we're ordinary or that
- Robert** Aye, but if it's gonnae become legalised, it's gonnae become a big problem, and they're no gonnae be able to resolve it
- Rose** If it comes legalised when I've got bairns, I'll say to them, 'wait till you're 16", that's what I'd say. I widnae be so much bothered when you're 16 but if you're like, 12, like ye ken, or 14, when I first started smoking it, ken I'd be quite bothered. It's just, you've no' got the money then but when you've got, like I widnae supply the money, but when they've got their ain money coming in they can dae what they want wi' it, basically. Just as long as it's no' higher class drugs

In contrast, an account from three young women living in much more privileged circumstances presents a similar argument, although underpinned by a very different rationale. While both accounts oppose legalisation on the grounds that it may lead to more widespread use of cannabis among young people, the following account alone points to the potential for cannabis to get in the way of academic performance, perhaps reflecting the participants' own status as high achieving pupils with career aspirations:

- Int** Do you think cannabis will ever be as common as cigarettes among young people
- Mel (16)** I'd say it almost is in our year
- Mo (16)** Not as common but if it was legal I think it would

- Mel** Maybe not actually because some people will smoke but be completely against cannabis because it's a banned like substance
- Mary (16)** Yeah, but I don't think, I think it would be less socially acceptable to smoke cannabis
- Mel** I think it's easier to smoke fags because they don't give you the same like, effect. Like, you can have a fag, and then still do, go in to school and do work. Whereas if you do cannabis, trying to do work. I mean you just laugh. It's just really. I don't think it'll ever be, well I hope it'll never be, like, people going out and having like six, like doses of cannabis a day because I mean, people'll never get anything done
- Mary** But, it's definitely getting more common

A widespread view among many of the participants in this study appears to be that changes in the cannabis laws is likely to lead to more young people experimenting with cannabis. It is not so much the cannabis use itself that people perceive to be a problem, however, but rather, other factors associated with the behaviour. What also seems clear, is that these concerns are grounded in people's specific circumstances. Thus, high academic achievers worry about the adverse effects of cannabis on their school work, while others living in less advantaged circumstances worry about being exploited by local shopkeepers. Other participants, for example, two boys who indicate in another part of their account that they already spend their lunch money on cigarettes, are concerned that legally sanctioned cannabis use will further drain young people's resources:

- Int** Cannabis use will never be as common as cigarette smoking among young people?
- David (13)** Well, I think if it comes
- Des (13)** If it gets legalised
- David** Aye, then it will
- Des** It might
- Int** What do you think about legalisation - do you think that should happen?
- David** Nah, I don't think it should, 'cause then that means more kids will experiment
- Des** Then they'll just spend more and more and more

These data seem to confirm that the drugs debate, in particular arguments related to cannabis control, are issues of considerable interest and relevance in many young people's lives. The accounts provided by participants in this study are for the most part sophisticated and measured and are grounded in their own particular social circumstances. The range of views presented also reflect opinion on both sides of the debate. Across the whole study, there appears to be widespread support for a change in the cannabis laws that would enable cannabis to be used for medical

purposes. Some participants, in particular those who have not themselves experimented with cannabis, argue, however, that this should be strictly controlled through a doctor's prescription. Only cannabis users seemed to favour reforms which would allow cannabis to be used for recreational purposes, although some cannabis users also expressed reservations about the potential impact of such a change. A range of arguments were used to justify a relaxation in cannabis control. Most commonly, participants argued that this would free up judicial resources which would be much better spent elsewhere, and it would avoid criminalising large numbers of young people, with all the attendant social risks associated with this. Some also felt that the 'chilling out' effects of cannabis are preferable to the aggressive behaviour which often results from young people drinking. Most also argued, however, for some form of control. An age limit of sixteen was felt appropriate, although the way some participants discussed this suggests that the usual chronological criterion is not the only one they use to define age - other factors also seem to have some significance. From this perspective, 'age' is not so much a fixed category, but rather a marker of a particular life stage that for some young people, but not all, represents a shift from dependence to independence, from immaturity to maturity. This may imply that for these participants, only those sixteen year olds who meet these additional criteria, for example, who have direct access to their own resources, are appropriate beneficiaries of any change in the cannabis laws.

A clear distinction was made between possession of small amounts for personal use on the one hand, and cultivation and dealing, on the other. A range of reservations about the possible consequences of 'legalisation' were also expressed. Some felt that a relaxation in the law would encourage more people to experiment, although others expressed the view that the law as it is currently enforced does not constitute a deterrent in any case. These opposing views may reflect variations in beliefs and experiences about risk-taking as well as variations in how current cannabis laws are implemented. For risk-takers, a change in the law, far from having a deterrent effect, may actually result in a reduction in use since the risks associated with being caught would disappear. If the police are currently turning a blind eye to possession of small amounts of cannabis, as some participants claim, then similarly, a change in the law is unlikely to have any significant effect. On the other hand, young people who are curious about cannabis but who have been deterred from trying it because of fear of being caught, may feel more inclined to try it, should it become legal. In situations where the law is enforced, to the detriment of those caught using cannabis, a relaxation in the law may encourage greater use. Others felt that changes in the



cannabis law would open up new opportunities for commercial exploitation and that young people may spend a disproportionate amount of their income on this. Some also worried that such a change may encourage more regular and patterned use of cannabis which would have a detrimental effect on school work.

These data, although far from comprehensive, provide some initial insights into where young people themselves stand on the cannabis debate. It seems clear that such a change would have an impact on various aspects of young people's social worlds but at this stage, we can only speculate about what these changes might be.

### **Participants' views on existing police enforcement policies**

In addition to expressing views about where they stand in relation to a potential change in the cannabis laws and the kind of impact they believe this might have, some participants also discussed the issue of how the police enforce current cannabis legislation. An exploration of these data seem to suggest that enforcement policies may vary from area to area. Some accounts suggest that the police generally take official action when they catch young people with cannabis. According to one account, they may even act in situations where they only suspect that young people have been using cannabis, although none is actually found:

- Int** O.K., would you say that using cannabis can get you into a lot of trouble?
- Nils (14)** Aye
- Nicol (15)** If you're stoned oot your heid and the bizzies catch you, but if you haven't got anything on you, all they can dae is caution you

Another account implies that some police officers may flaunt their own rules, not only to save themselves time and effort, but also in order to secure the confiscated cannabis for themselves. While it is possible to read such a suggestion as an accusation of improper behaviour, it seems more likely that it simply reflects these participants' view that even within the ranks of those charged with enforcing the law, cannabis is considered to be 'no big deal':

- Int** What do you think about the legalisation thing? Do you think it should be legalised?
- Damien (15)** I'm no' bothered really, if it helps
- Darren (15)** It would stop all the, stop a lot of hassle as well with the police and the government and that. 'Cause a lot of folk, just with the police, they come up and they have to do all the paperwork and all that for the cannabis. But a lot of the police they're supposed to put it in like an

evidence bag and that. They don't. They just take it off you and put it in their pocket. No doubt they're probably going home smoking it themselves

Other accounts make a clear distinction between how they perceive or in some cases, have actually experienced, the enforcement approach that police officers take in relation to different kinds of drugs offence. In particular, these draw a distinction between buying and using cannabis for personal use, and dealing or supplying it to others:

- Int** What about the police, what's their attitude to it all - do they, do folk get done if they're caught smoking?
- Norrie (15)** They've never been caught, like I've never saw anybody getting caught. Like there's been a pal standing beside me that the polis have came up to them, so he just stopped it and dropped it, ken what I mean, slipped it oot their pocket and dropped it outside - never got caught
- Neil (15)** There was a Drug Squad meant to be in Backton and they just went round all the doors and they only got about three
- Norrie** They only catch, like, dealers, but no' like people that buy it
- Mo (16)** I mean there's so many like people fighting for it to be legalised that it's, in a way, I mean the police are starting to get a bit .. because what are they going to do? I mean
- Mel (16)** I think in some ways the police kind of just, you know close their eyes and just walk on
- Mo** I don't think in general, I mean unless you're being a big dealer
- Mary (16)** Yes, in an extreme case, it's
- Mo** But if you're there with a spliff and that's all you have, I don't think they're gonna do much about it

Some participants seem to take the view that the police associate small amounts of cannabis with personal use but that they are likely to interpret larger quantities as an intent to supply. While this latter situation is punishable and subject to serious sanctions, the police may not take action in cases where only small amounts are discovered. From this perspective, existing cannabis laws, in some cases at least, do not appear to have a deterrent effect. Those young people who are sufficiently 'street-wise' can easily exploit the lack of clarity and consistency in how current cannabis laws are enforced. It may even be the case that the illegal status of cannabis, far from acting as a deterrent, actually encourages experimentation, at least among young people who want to rebel against authority:

**Int** What do you think the school would make of it - do they know that goes on?

**Brian (15)** Aye, the school's found folk wi' hash on them and suspended them. Then they get back in and it just happens again

**Billy (13)** Nothing they can dae aboot it - they get the bizzies in' and that but you're not going to supply it - just gonnae smoke it. And that hing aboot, you need, like, a certain amount, but you could only like, still have a half quarter and then you're going to sell it - they dinnae ken that

**Brian** Uhu. Just say you're gonnae smoke it or something

**Int** Yeah

**Brian** When I get lifted, the police an' that find skins in my pocket and they dinnae even say anything. It's just like, what are they for? Oh, just to fix my fags when they snap, that's a' you need to say

**Billy** Can't if you've got skins for own personal use - no intent to supply wi' skins. Naw, I widnae really bother if the bizzies, like, caught me wi' stuff on me

While this analysis relies on relatively few accounts, it does seem to paint a general picture of inconsistency in how the police enforce the current cannabis laws. The most common view, at least among those with personal experience of using cannabis, seems to be that the police may turn a blind eye in circumstances where young people are caught with a small amount of cannabis, although it is likely that this may vary from area to area. For some boys, there even seems to be entertainment value attached to being caught but 'getting away with it'. Some appear to implicate a lack of clarity and consistency across the country in enforcing current cannabis laws as the main factor making it difficult for the police to act. From this perspective, a change in the law which would clarify matters would be a welcome development. As noted earlier, since the fieldwork for this study took place, a decision has been taken to downgrade cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug. This is due to be implemented in 2003 and it remains to be seen what impact this will have on young people's cannabis use. It is possible that cannabis may lose some of its appeal for those young people who are attracted to risk, although as we have seen in an earlier chapter, the excitement associated with cannabis is often not so much to do with the behaviour itself, as with other related factors. It may also be, of course, that cannabis could become more appealing and more accessible to other young people once the stigma of criminalisation is removed. Further research is required to shed light on the actual impact of this forthcoming change in the law.

## **Popular culture and young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour**

As noted earlier, the most salient issue for young people in terms of cultural influences appeared to be the current debate on cannabis reform. As we have seen, some participants drew upon media references to express and explain their views, and this final section will further explore how participants discussed two particular aspects of popular culture and their potential impact on young people's health related beliefs and behaviour. The first of these is the influence of role models, particularly from the music world, and the second is the impact of television advertising, both from a commercial and a public health perspective. It is possibly significant that in several instances, participants took the opportunity of introducing ideas relating to this theme right at the end of the interview, in the context of the last question asking them if they had any final comments they wished to make. Their introduction of this theme at this particular point perhaps suggests added salience.

Perhaps as a way of trying to create a favourable lasting impression, two of the participants began the final part of their account with an apparent endorsement of the well known public health mantra 'don't do drugs'. This soon develops, though, into a more measured discussion of the potential influence that leading figures in the music business can exert over some young people. As we have seen in a previous chapter, many of the boys in this study used a gendered frame of reference to explain some aspects of girls' behaviour, in particular their cannabis use. The following account draws upon these ideas, suggesting that younger people, particularly young girls, are most vulnerable to this sort of influence:

- Int** I think we're just about through now actually. Any last comments that you want to make? Anything I've not asked you?
- Damien (15)** Don't do drugs
- Darren (15)** Don't do drugs. If you smoke and drink just stick to that and try and give it up
- Damien** Like Dr Dre, don't do that, think it's cool, dinnae you do it (laugh)
- Darren** Role models like rap stars and that smoke drugs and that and then they go, wow, look at him man. You see folk walking about totally dressed funny, smoking and that and you know they're not like that
- Damien** I like raps, like, but some of the films are a' right but they, if they smoke hash, make younger people think it's cool and stuff. So it's
- Darren** Shouldn't be allowed to put it on, like. Stars like Craig David, he's like, a lot of young girls and that think he's great and that. But his new, well his, not his newest one, but his newer film that he brought out, he's sitting there rolling a joint and smoking it. Well a lot of wee girls'll think I'm gonnae do that just 'cause he does it
- Damien** So he'll like me



Another interview ended in similar fashion, with the two participants providing a fascinating account of how this influence operates in relation to their own cannabis use behaviour. They identify several strands, first of all focusing on the interaction of song lyrics that explicitly mention cannabis with the popularity and respect enjoyed by those artists. As with the previous extract, this account highlights the role of one particular musical genre - rap - which has come to be associated, although not exclusively, with cannabis use. The clear implication is that the combination of these factors encourages some young people, particularly rap fans who are already using cannabis, to continue with this behaviour. But, the processes involved in this are more complex. The account goes on to suggest that listening to rap lyrics which actively promote cannabis while actually using the drug, not only enhances the musical experience, but also acts as a powerful motivator to continue using cannabis. From this perspective, listening to music goes beyond mere passive consumption, involving cultural processes which include the exercise of critical choice (Willis, 1990):

- Int** O.K., I think we've just about covered everything. Any last things you want to mention - anything I've not asked you that you think it would be good for me to know, or do you think we've covered everything?
- Neal (14)** Well, I've noticed that quite a lot of songs that mentions hash. Do you ken Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams? He goes, "me smoke heavy tar" and they say that they don't need to get so high and that and like, you've got Eminem, he's got (sings lyric)
- Int** Uhu, so how do you think that influences young people?
- Neal** Well, you think 'cause they're like rappers and they're respected
- Nathan (13)** Aye
- Neal** And 'cause mair people like that kind of music and its good to listen to when you're stoned. And then you're stoned and you're listening to it and it's telling you to smoke hash, you're like - well, they dae it. And then S Club 7
- Nathan** Aye
- Neal** Couple of members
- Nathan** Three guys
- Neal** Three guys were caught smoking it and they've been taken oot the Sugar Puff advert 'cause it's bad publicity or something

Unlike the previous participants, neither the substance of their account, nor the animated way in which it was delivered, suggests that they are in any way critical of this type of influence. On the contrary, as we have seen in a previous chapter, the role that cannabis plays in these particular participants' lives appears to extend beyond the actual experience to include a range of social benefits. Through their

involvement in this behaviour, these boys have gained access to a cultural group which seems to enhance their social identity and social standing within their peer group and wider community. It is not surprising, then, that this additional association with musicians who enjoy a certain degree of fame and notoriety is seen as a positive thing.

The influence of role models was raised in another interview, this time in response to a question about changing attitudes to cannabis. Unlike previous accounts, these participants drew their role models from two very different sources - prominent politicians and ordinary, hard-working people. Their account clearly links recreational cannabis use with busy, productive lifestyles. Elsewhere in their interview, they clearly differentiate between occasional recreational use of cannabis and other, more harmful patterns of drug use, both of which are common in their community. Their implication seems to be that unlike recreational cannabis users, these individuals do not have the same potential to lead fruitful lives, but it is not cannabis itself that is responsible for this, rather, it is the broader context of their social circumstances that create this kind of barrier. This argument perhaps draws attention to the limitations of drugs policy which fails to differentiate between different drugs and between the different types of social context within which cannabis is used:

- Int** And, like, we were saying about fags not being much of a big deal anymore - would you say it's the same with cannabis?
- Neville (13)** Naw, its no' a big deal either, man. Saying that, I know a guy he's in the Scottish Parliament, or something, and he smokes it an' that and he's going to get it legalised an' that, ken what I mean. And he's got a well-paid job an' that, ken what I mean
- Int** Right. Do you think a lot of folk in that kind of position do it as well?
- Neville** Aye, like everybody, like that Mo Mowlam, Tony Blair an' that, they've a' tried it, ken what I mean
- Nick (14)** Lots of folk, like workies, even if you're a busy guy
- Neville** Exactly
- Nick** Most busy guys smoke hash - disnae matter what you work as - its no' going to stop you
- Int** Right
- Neville** Exactly, man

The role of T.V. and film, particularly television advertising, was also raised in a number of interviews in relation to their potential impact on a range of health-related beliefs and behaviour in young people. In a number of interviews, participants

highlighted in a very general way, how television may interact with a range of other factors to influence young people's health-related behaviour. Other accounts were more explicit about how adverts for particular alcoholic beverages can encourage young people to drink to excess:

- Int** So what do you think leads people to start using hash?
- Ruth (12)** Maybe like if
- Roseann (12)** Maybe your friends may, like, have big brothers or sisters or something like that. Or something like that you've seen like on telly or
- Ruth** Just stuff like that
- 
- Int** So, your friends, the people around you obviously have an influence on these things - what other things do you think influence?
- Bridget (13)** T.V. (laugh)
- Int** T.V.?
- Barbara (14)** Definitely
- Bridget** But not.. The T.V. influences us to, like, go out and get drunk and go partying because it'll make you have a better time. And, em, like the Budweiser advert, that's really funny and it'll attract people to Budweiser because it's so funny
- Int** Uhu?
- Bridget** 'Cause that's like the best advert ever
- Int** So it quite appeals to young people?
- Barbara** (Laugh) The next day after it was shown, there was about a hundred people in the school walking down the street going (sings extract from Budweiser ad in a funny voice)
- Bridget** Especially the people I hang around with, they were all sort of yelling

This account seems to suggest that certain adverts are specifically targeted at young people. They try to reach this audience by 'selling' a particular lifestyle and are presented in a humorous style that both appeals to young people and is likely to be not only remembered but mimicked amongst the young people it is aimed at. This view is consistent with recent research which concludes that the alcohol industry has responded to trends which have seen a growth in the value that youth culture attaches to brand labels and symbols (Jackson et al, 2000). They have approached this by designing alcoholic products which appeal to young people, using well-informed and precisely targeted marketing strategies. According to these participants, this strategy would appear to be working.

Some references to the potential influence of film and T.V., however, describe how this kind of coverage, far from encouraging risky behaviour, may actually have a

deterrent effect. Referring to a film which continues to enjoy cult status among some young people, the following extract suggests that its portrayal of someone dying after first trying a drug is likely to reinforce the message that all drugs are dangerous and can kill you - even cannabis. It is quite possible, of course, that this portrayal could be interpreted in quite a different way by other young people, in particular, by those who are more 'drug-wise' and who may have a different set of values and personal experience:

- Robbie (13)** Hash does kill ye, but no' as quick as fags  
**Ross (13)** I dinnae ken what half of the stuff looks like, eh, and that's the way I want tae keep it  
**Robbie** What's that stuff called? Speed I think it is, when you cut it up, it's a' that wee white stuff and you sniff it  
**Int** I'm not sure  
**Robbie** I saw that on a film, eh, and I'd never try that, 'cause the time that I watched, the guy had been daein' it for ages and his girl-friend tried it and she died. Pulp Fiction - have you ever seen it?  
**Ross** Nup  
**Robbie** It's a funny film  
**Ross** I widnae dae it. I widnae dae any of them. Just dinnae want tae ken anything aboot it. Just want tae live my own life, die when I like as long as it's like when I'm like 40 or 50 or that. As long as it's high up in the years

So far, young participants' accounts have concentrated on commercial film and television, but some of the interviews also discussed how some parts of the public health movement, particularly the Health Education Board for Scotland, has tried to harness the power of the media in order to promote health enhancing behaviours among young people. Some participants used a reference to the HEBS advertising campaign as way of weighing up the effectiveness of different types of health promotion message. They seem to come out in favour of more sophisticated and subtle approaches which attempt to exploit aspects of youth culture, in this instance, for health improvement purposes:

- Int** So, what do you think would help to make folk stop smoking, or not start in the first place?  
**Ross (13)** Gie them they wee things where they pretend they're smoking  
**Robbie (13)** I think there should be mair adverts on the telly of people dying and everything, 'cause there's hardly any  
**Ross** Like that HEBS thing  
**Int** Aye, HEBS, STYNX, the band  
**Robbie** And they only end up running away, running away fae them and that  
**Ross** Aye, it's a good song



**Int** You think that's quite a good advert?  
**Ross** Aye it should be on a bit more I think  
**Robbie** That would stop maist people because of the song and the laddies running away fae them and that. A' that there really is like on the fag packet, it says smoking kills and that's it

Other participants highlight additional aspects of the HEBS ads which they think may effectively tap into young people's consciousness. However, since these participants themselves report being current smokers, it would appear that the smoking advert they refer to, while witty and clever, has not had any actual impact on their own behaviour. It seems likely that the potential deterrent effect of these adverts may be mediated by young people's own personal experience. So, while these participants seem to view both the smoking and the heroin adverts as effective, there are apparent differences in how they integrate these messages into their own lives. The smoking ad has not stopped them smoking, but the heroin ad perhaps reinforces existing attitudes towards smoking heroin, and may act as a deterrent to possible future drug experimentation:

**Bridget (13)** I liked the one, there's a land of cool, really cool beings and they all chew on blue sticks  
**Barbara (14)** Yeah  
**Bridget** And it's to do with anti-smoking, and they go, "that's bogging", "that tastes bogging" (in funny voice)  
**Int** So, do you think that works with young people?  
**Bridget** Yeah, 'cause the more funny they make them the better. And the one when the boy's offered heroin and there's like the two sides of the story - that's a good one because it shows you what could happen to you. You could be living on the streets asking people for pennies, just because you've had heroin  
**Barbara** I don't think that bothers too many people - they don't think about what could happen to them - nup  
**Bridget** Yeah, but when you see that advert  
**Barbara** I think they're all too stupid to think about that  
**Bridget** Yeah, not a lot of people we know think about the future

Another extract, from two young cannabis users, provides a further insight into this kind of distinction. HEBS themselves have conducted an evaluation of the heroin advert and on the basis of their data, conclude that the vast majority of young people who watch this advert strongly identify with it and view smoking heroin as dangerous (HEBS, 2000). However, it is possible that the advert may not have the same kind of impact on everyone. Some young people, drawing upon their own personal experience, appear to adopt a more critical approach to this kind of

advertising. The following critique, which emerged in the context of the card exercise, is perhaps all the more powerful because it does not write the advert off altogether, but acknowledges that it has some resonance in their own lives:

<b>Int</b>	O.K., using cannabis can get you into a lot of trouble?
<b>Neal (14)</b>	Naw
<b>Nathan (13)</b>	Well, if you start selling your stuff just to get it
<b>Neal</b>	Never sold anything of mine for hash
<b>Nathan</b>	And break into motors
<b>Neal</b>	See the adverts (think he means the HEBS, split-screen heroin ad), I think that's a wee bit taking it too far - especially for hash - I dinnae think you could get that really addicted that you'd have to start selling stuff. But there have quite been a few times I've took extra money from the bank, the money bank, and from my mum's purse

It is perhaps not surprising, given the increasing impact of consumerism in society, that many young people in this study referred to the potential influence of cultural media on aspects of their lives. Their accounts provide some interesting insights into young people's perspectives on this issue, although understanding more about how such factors actually influence behaviour is, of course, a much more complex and elusive challenge. It would appear, though, that how young people relate to these potential influences is likely to depend on many different factors. Structural factors of age, gender and socio-economic circumstances are likely to be important. So too are young people's personal experience with cannabis and other substances, and their level of identification with different aspects of youth culture. Of particular significance, it seems that the deterrent effect of public health advertising may be compromised if these adverts appear to contradict aspects of young people's own personal experience. It is a matter of some concern, though, that the drinks industry may be more effective at successfully exploiting its knowledge of aspects of youth culture in order to open up a new market for its products.

## Summary

This chapter has attempted to look beyond family, peer, friendship and community networks to explore young people's accounts of how factors operating at a broader, cultural level may affect aspects of their lives. These data seem to suggest that most young people favour a relaxation in the cannabis laws, although within some form of regulatory framework. Some participants are concerned, though, that such a change may lead to more widespread cannabis use among young people. Now that the recent decision to reclassify is about to be implemented, it would seem timely to

develop further research which would explore how this change may affect aspects of young people's social worlds. For example, in an earlier chapter we saw that such a change may have implications for how young people's cannabis use is managed within the family context. Research which further explores the potential difficulties faced by parents in managing their children's cannabis use, may be very useful in the light of this development. This chapter has also shed some light on how young people view the potential impact of role models and television advertising on aspects of their lives. This is a complex issue and young people's perceptions are likely to be grounded in the particular circumstances of their own lives.

**Introduction**

In previous chapters, we have seen that young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour are shaped within many different contexts. Participants' accounts have provided us with some insights, for example, into how young people's cannabis use is managed within the family context and how older siblings may play a role in passing on lay knowledge about cannabis. We have also seen how young people's cannabis use is shaped to some extent by the nature of their peer affiliations and the sorts of leisure cultures they engage in. Factors operating at a local neighbourhood level have also been shown to be important in shaping health related beliefs and behaviour. Young people's relationship with cannabis, of course, is also currently being influenced by the current reclassification debate. Data from this study suggests that most young people favour a relaxation in the cannabis laws, although we know little about how the decision to downgrade cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug will affect aspects of young people's social worlds.

This final data chapter is different from the others in two key respects. Firstly, it does not relate to a particular social context, rather it explores young people's perspectives on aspects of their behaviour across contexts. Secondly, unlike the other chapters, it sets out to compare how young people understand aspects of two specific behaviours - cigarette smoking and cannabis use. As will be obvious from the analysis that has gone before, this study has purposefully aligned young people's cannabis use more closely with cigarette smoking than with use of hard drugs for a number of reasons. In particular, the study aims to build on the findings of a number of earlier studies which have highlighted new links between young people's cannabis use and their cigarette smoking (Allbutt et al, 1995, Bell et al, 1998). These studies suggest that for some young people, using cannabis may support and sustain their cigarette smoking in a range of ways. In particular, these studies highlight a new relationship - the potential for cannabis to introduce some young people to tobacco and subsequently to cigarette smoking. Many recent studies also highlight young people's cannabis use as part of a constellation of recreational substance use behaviours which usually include cigarettes and alcohol. As we have already seen, however, this is not to deny that some young people also use other illegal drugs in these kinds of recreational contexts, nor that young people's substance use is always non-problematic. However, for the purposes of this study which has set out to investigate young people's cannabis use in their early teenage years, it makes more



sense to explore cannabis in relation to cigarette smoking. This is particularly important given the recent decision to downgrade cannabis, and the enduring significance of both cannabis and cigarettes in many young people's lives. This, then, is the explicit purpose of this final data chapter.

### **Comparing perspectives on cannabis and cigarettes - some limitations**

As discussed in an earlier chapter, a key aim of this study is to more fully understand how young people distinguish between their tobacco and cannabis use behaviours, although from an early stage, the emphasis has been on cannabis. There are two main reasons for this - a large body of evidence on young people's smoking already exists, and methodologically, it proved difficult to generate data on young people's perspectives on both behaviours in the context of this study. One exception to this is that many participants talked about wanting to quit smoking, and some volunteered information on their actual experiences of trying to quit. These data raised the question of whether participants talk about cannabis in the same way and therefore provided a useful point of comparison. As the analysis developed, it soon became clear that concepts of 'addiction' 'dependence' and 'harm' formed part of young people's understandings of their smoking behaviour. Participants also introduced these concepts in relation to cannabis (both during the interview itself and in the context of a stimulus activity which is described below) and it became possible to use the smoking cessation data in another way. These data could also provide a point of comparison for how these concepts appeared to inform participants' understandings of cigarette smoking, on the one hand, and cannabis use, on the other. An important limitation of this comparison, however, is that it does not compare like with like. Instead, it compares how participants used these concepts to explain their actual difficulties in quitting smoking with how they used these concepts in relation to cannabis in a much more abstract way. This clearly limits the force of the analysis, but nonetheless provides some interesting insights into a little understood aspect of these two behaviours.

Apart from these data on smoking cessation, most of the accounts relate to cannabis, not cigarettes, and this imposes further limitations on the potential for comparing participants' perspectives on both behaviours. Other difficulties also arose in trying to generate the kinds of data which would facilitate a meaningful comparison. In an attempt to satisfy the overarching aim of eliciting young people's perspectives rather than imposing a predominantly adult-defined agenda, early interviews included a question designed to explore how participants felt these two behaviours might be

linked. In practice, however, this approach proved problematic and this question was generally met with perplexed looks or requests for clarification. On reflection, it was perhaps a bit naïve to suppose that this rather abstract question would elicit insightful data. The way participants responded, though, may also suggest that young people simply do not think about cannabis and cigarettes in these sorts of comparative terms.

Another way of trying to 'get at' young people's ideas on this theme was therefore required, and to this end, an 'agree-disagree' card game was introduced. This involved presenting a range of statements to participants towards the end of the interview, asking them whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement and then to explain their view. The activity was aimed primarily at exploring how young people distinguish between these two behaviours and included statements such as 'You can't get addicted to cannabis' and 'Smoking a cigarette is just the same as smoking a cannabis joint'. In order to explore participants' views on the potential for cannabis to introduce some young people to cigarette smoking, one statement also read, 'Sometimes young people who've never smoked cigarettes before try cannabis and then end up becoming a regular cigarette smoker'. In so far as these statements introduced public health concepts such as 'addiction', the use of this stimulus activity could be said to compromise to a certain extent on a commitment to focusing on young people's issues and concerns. However, generating data on these sorts of themes is an important health promotion goal, particularly in the context of this study. It is also the case that in many instances, participants themselves initiated discussion of themes such as 'harm' and 'addiction' in relation to cannabis in the context of the interview itself. As noted earlier, many participants also drew heavily on concepts of 'addiction' and 'dependence' to explain their actual experiences of attempting to quit their cigarette smoking habit. These data, together with participants' views on 'addiction' as it relates to cannabis therefore provide the basis for a comparison of this theme as it relates to both behaviours. The discussion that follows therefore draws upon two main sets of data - participants' responses to the 'agree-disagree' statements and data which emerged earlier in the interviews.

The first part of this chapter will show that young people appear to view 'addiction' as a concept which is relevant to both behaviours, although more so for cigarettes than for cannabis. In many cases, though, participants' seem to use this concept in an ambiguous and apparently contradictory way, and this perhaps highlights the tension between the physical effects of addiction, on the one hand, and the social role of

these two behaviours in young people's lives, on the other. Building on earlier insights about the role of older siblings in passing on lay knowledge about the 'therapeutic' effects of cannabis, this chapter will also explore how participants' compare cannabis with cigarettes in terms of relative 'harmfulness'. The chapter will conclude by presenting accounts which appear to show that in a number of respects, young people's cannabis use has the potential to support and sustain their cigarette smoking.

### **Participants' accounts of trying to give up smoking cigarettes**

We know little about how young people understand the concept of 'addiction' in relation to cigarette smoking, still less about how they relate the concept to cannabis. In terms of tobacco consumption, we know that most addicted smokers take up the habit during adolescence and that nicotine is a highly addictive substance, some claim more difficult to give up than heroin or cocaine (Royal College of Physicians, 2000). We also know that many young people now say that they want to stop, but cannot, although it is possible that for some this may simply represent an 'addiction discourse' which provides them with an acceptable excuse for failing. The dominant public health explanation for young people's continued smoking has likewise tended to emphasise the physiological aspects of addiction at the expense of trying to understand the social role of smoking in young people's lives. So, how do young people themselves talk about their attempts to quit? Many participants in this study talked about wanting or intending to give up smoking. In most cases, participants appear to experience trying to give up either as something that they plan to do at some point in the future or as something that has to be attempted on several occasions - it is not generally regarded as a one-off event. For some, smoking appears to play a key role in helping to manage stress. Trying to give up is itself experienced as stressful, and is viewed as incompatible with also having to manage difficult life circumstances:

**Mel (16)**     'Cause I mean, I really don't plan to be a smoker. I mean, I plan to give up once school's, like, 'cause I'm going for a year out, so I plan to just give up then. It's just because at the moment to have the stress of fifth year, and have the stress of giving up smoking, I just don't think I could handle it

**Int**             Right, do you smoke cigarettes as well?

**Bruce (15)**    Yeah, I smoke fags as well

**Bret (15)**     I'm trying to gie up, I mean I've been to the doctor and everything

**Int**             What, to give up fags?

**Bret** Aye, it's like I've been to the doctor, right 'cause I really want to stop but I mean I cannae stop - it's just like that - and that's when I walk into the hoose and I'm pissed off again wi' my ma and that's how everything starts up again, eh

Bruce's reference to seeking help from the doctor also seems to suggest an acknowledgement of the physiological effects of smoking. Other participants, even some as young as thirteen, clearly experience trying to stop as an intensely physical and emotional experience. These symptoms are associated with nicotine addiction and seem to imply a physical dependence which makes it very difficult to quit:

**Int** Have you ever thought about stopping at all?  
**Neville (13)** I've tried stopping - I snapped up ten fags, two minutes later I was greetin' to get mair, man  
**Int** Were you? What does it feel like if you don't smoke?  
**Neville** Feels weird, man actually, you get a' distressed and angry - look at a bit of paper and go off your nut  
**Int** Do you ever see yourself stopping?  
**Neville** I dunno, like  
**Nick (14)** I can see myself stopping, but like I says, if people offer me a fag I would take it  
**Neville** I couldnae see myself stopping, like  
**Int** Right, yeah, why's that?  
**Neville** I dunno, it's just like I said, I've tried it before, but, I get a' dizzy an' that when I've no' had a fag

As hinted at in this account, though, smoking also appears to serve a social function, and many accounts were explicit about the social role of smoking, and in particular, how this contributes to the difficulties that many young people appear to experience when trying to quit. For some, smoking seems to be an integral part of their leisure culture, and while it is possible to do without cigarettes for relatively long periods of time when outwith this context, it is very difficult to sustain this behaviour on returning to it:

**Int** Have you ever tried to stop before?  
**Mel (16)** Yeah, I can do it. Like, when I'm on holiday, like, last time I was away with my parents, I was away for ten days and then I was away for a week and I don't have a problem. It's like in our society, when I'm with all my friends, it's like, it isn't because they push me into it, it's because among them it's just like, ah, like, I'm sitting in a café. It isn't really that interesting. It's just, I don't know  
**Mo (16)** It's something to do  
**Mel** Yeah



For others, it is peers' smoking at school that constitutes a powerful force, capable of challenging and overcoming young people's apparent resolve to quit. So even those who have adopted the strategic approach of using sustained periods of time away from their peers in order to launch a cessation attempt, end up failing:

- Int** So you were saying that you both tried to stop but it hadn't worked out. What happened there?
- Dee (14)** Well I was at home for, like, the holidays, and, like, mum and dad don't know, and I don't want them to know. So, like, I just couldn't smoke so I didn't smoke like for about two weeks or something. And as soon as I got back to school and everyone was smoking, and it was really
- Dot (15)** Yeah. I went to my dad's for about two or three weeks and I thought, right, this is a good chance because I can't have them and my dad obviously doesn't know I smoke. And when I came back, as soon as I came back, I had them, so

Other accounts implicate the peer ritual of offering cigarettes around as the main stumbling block in their efforts to give up smoking, even at the cost of reduced levels of fitness. From this perspective, social reasons, rather than reasons related to physical dependence, even when this is also an issue, are regarded as having more influence:

- Nicol (15)** Before I started smoking, I used to play fitba'. On Wednesday I was playing fitba' and, oh, I was tired oot, I was knackered
- Nils (14)** Used to be able to muck about for two and a half hours an' a that
- Int** So did you really feel the difference, then?
- Nicol** Aye, I wish I'd never fucking
- Nils** Started
- Nicol** Aye, I wish I'd never seen fags - I'll stop sooner or later
- Int** Right, have you ever tried to give up fags?
- Nicol** Aye
- Int** What was that like? Have you tried the patches?
- Nicol** Nup, just the gum. I lasted about four or five days without a fag. But as soon as I come back and see a' them, eh, they're just smoking a fag. And it's, here, have a draw, and that's it, start up again
- Int** Right, so is it your mates around you still smoking that makes it hard?
- Nicol** Aye, if they were to stop, then it'd be easy

But in some cases, peer influence can also take a more cynical and deliberate form. Some young people, it would appear, end up returning to smoking in order to save face or perhaps because it seems like the easiest option:

**Rose (15)** I dinnae buy them a lot, 'cause I'm no' - well, I am addicted to them, but I dinnae buy them a lot - I'd say probably about two or three a day

**Robert (14)** Naw, it a' depends - I buy enough for about ten a day but then at night, but then again the next day in the morning I've got yin for in the morning before I go to school, break, lunch and after school and then I think I buy another ten. So, say about nine maybe, or something

**Int** Yeah. You were both saying you feel you're addicted?

**Rose** A wee bit, aye

**Robert** I've tried stopping loads o' times, but I dinnae ken, you ken

**Rose** I have stopped a couple o' times but they're just like, oh, do you want a draw, and you're just like, naw - and they keep on teasing you, blowing smoke an' everything in your face. And I just say, oh, "gie's a draw", and then just smoke it, and then you dae regret it later

As noted earlier, many young people explicitly mentioned or hinted at the role that 'addiction' plays in their continued smoking, and in particular, as a barrier to quitting. Some participants were very clear about the powerful effect of nicotine addiction on their inability to quit smoking. Barry, for example, talked about seeking help from the doctor, and Neville graphically described the physical symptoms of nicotine dependence. For them, the lack of congruence between their stated desire to quit and their apparent inability to do so, seems to be the result of a state of physical dependence over which they have little control. Others, though, talked about this in an ambiguous, uncertain way, and it may be that this partly reflects a tension between their views on, and experience of, the physical effects of addiction, on the one hand, and the social role of smoking in their lives, on the other. These participants perhaps do not want to acknowledge their vulnerability to nicotine addiction, but instead, implicate the role of smoking in their peer cultures as the reason why they are unable to quit. Of course, it may also be that this discourse of wanting to quit has quite a different origin. Nowadays, cigarette smoking is universally accepted as 'bad' and it is perhaps not surprising that many smokers talk about wanting to quit. Being unable to achieve this, whether for physiological or social reasons or a combination of both, could be used as a way of avoiding personal responsibility for addressing smoking behaviour. This may help to explain why so many young smokers make repeated, yet apparently half-hearted, failed attempts to stop smoking while others manage to quit the habit with relative ease. Nonetheless, for some young smokers, nicotine addiction, and peers continuing to smoke, appear to be salient issues which are influential to varying degrees in maintaining their smoking behaviour. For many young smokers, quitting smoking is an ongoing process that is difficult to achieve and some seem more confident and determined than others that they will eventually succeed. Those who understand 'addiction' in

terms of physical dependence, seem less confident of their ability to quit than those who describe their smoking in predominantly social terms. But how do participants apply these concepts to their cannabis use? The next part of the chapter will address this issue.

### **Participants' accounts of 'addiction' in relation to cannabis**

A striking difference between how smokers talked about their smoking behaviour, on the one hand, and their cannabis use, on the other, relates to their use of a 'discourse' of wanting to quit. As we have seen, this was commonly applied to their tobacco use, but it was entirely absent from their accounts of their cannabis use. A few participants spoke about how they have cut down their cannabis consumption and shifted from a regular to a much more opportunistic pattern of use. Some also said that they had stopped using cannabis altogether, but none talked about 'wanting to stop'. Responses to a direct question about how participants viewed their likely relationship with cannabis in the future, provide some insights into how they view the role of cannabis in their lives as they get older. Most young people, it would appear, seem to regard cannabis as part of youthful experimentation - not something they are likely to spend much time on when they get older. The main rationale for this view seems to be that peers are likely to be less important, and less influential, as people get older. In this future context (unlike the current context), cannabis is viewed as something they can choose to do or not:

- Int** Is it quite hard for folk not to smoke (cannabis) if, like, their mates are doing it?
- Neal (14)** It's just too tempting - they offer you it, and then before you know it, you're doing it all the time
- Int** Could you ever see yourself giving it up?
- Neal** Aye, I know for a fact I could gie it up
- Nathan (13)** I won't be smoking hash when I get older
- Neal** Neither will I - I might buy it once in a while, just for, for whatever, but I know I won't be on it constantly when I'm older

Some participants drew attention to other dimensions of the social role that cannabis seems to play in their lives at the moment. According to this perspective, its main purpose is to relieve boredom and once this situation changes, it is likely to become something that people can take or leave. In a revealing remark, one participant also highlights how cannabis also has the potential to lead to other anti-social forms of behaviour:

- Int** O.K., what about hash, would you ever see yourself giving that up?

**Nils (14)** Aye, maybe  
**Nicol (15)** Probably, aye  
**Nils** When I'm older, aye, I think  
**Nicol** It's just like booze, something tae dae, and you all dae a bit of chorying (stealing) an' that to buy your hash an' that, drink

**Int** What would make you stop? Have you ever thought about stopping using hash?

**Billy (13)** Hash isnae, that, like, addictive, it's just something, like, you do if you're bored. 'Cause like I could just go, naw, I've stopped, and I wouldnae take it again, but

**Int** Right, so it's just a kind of boredom thing?

**Brian (15)** Aye

Other young people contrast this 'boring' and uneventful youthful existence with their future aspirations of having a busy, productive lifestyle. Under these circumstances cannabis is apparently regarded as incompatible or irrelevant since once young people start working, they will be otherwise occupied and have no need of these kinds of distraction. From this perspective, there is also a clear implication that cigarettes are much harder to quit than cannabis:

**Int** Right, do you see yourself still using it, like, in years to come, or what do you think?

**Neil (15)** Naw

**Norrie (15)** I'll have a job and be occupied, well I think I will

**Nash (15)** Same here

**Norrie** And no' even think about it

**Int** So, you were, like, saying that you don't do it anymore (use cannabis). Is that right, or do you just do it occasionally?

**Rose (15)** Well, I dinnae buy it, I dinnae dae that - I've got the money tae dae it, but, ye ken, 'cause I've got a job an' that, so - I dinnae see the point o' it - I dinnae see the point in smoking either, but. Smoking's much harder to stop and it's cheaper

Only one participant, a younger boy who clearly enjoyed talking about his cannabis experiences and who seemed to derive some degree of social benefit from his involvement with cannabis, talked about continuing with this behaviour into later life:

**Int** Right. Do you ever see yourself stopping when you get older or do you see yourself just carrying on?

**Ray (13)** I just see myself carrying on



**Rob (13)** I'll be drinking in the pubs, like, but I'll no' be smoking hash or that, nup, dinnae think so

So, why is it that young people use this discourse of wanting to stop smoking in relation to cigarettes, but not in relation to cannabis? It could be that even although these two behaviours are both part of the leisure cultures of many young people, they are nonetheless perceived in very different ways. Cigarette smoking seems to be viewed as a behaviour which has the potential to continue across the lifecourse. It is a behaviour which often encourages dependence, both in physical and social terms, and is difficult to quit. As noted earlier, it is also more or less universally condemned as a 'bad' thing to do. Cannabis, on the other hand, seems to be viewed as an activity which is largely confined to youthful experimentation. Furthermore, it does not appear to leave its users so vulnerable to addiction and dependence. Within the population at large, while there are many who oppose its use, there is also a groundswell of opinion that rates it as less harmful than both smoking and excessive drinking. As noted in an earlier chapter, for many young people, particularly boys engaged in street-based leisure cultures, cannabis also appears to perform a range of social functions. From this perspective, it is perhaps easier to understand why young people do not seem to talk about wanting to give it up. The next section explores participants' views on the specific relationship between cannabis and 'addiction' and provides further insights into how they understand this concept in relation to cannabis as opposed to cigarettes.

When thinking about the concept of addiction as it relates to cannabis, some young people tend to use their knowledge and understanding of hard drugs, particularly heroin, as their frame of reference. From this perspective, cannabis does not seem to be regarded as an addictive substance, except in the case of heavy, polydrug users. Holding this view seems to allow those who understand addiction in this way to distance themselves and their own 'benign' use of cannabis from the risk of dependence:

**Int** O.K., you can't get addicted to cannabis?

**Billy (13)** True

**Brian (15)** Depends

**Billy** I agree wi' that

**Brian** Nup, 'cause if you think aboot ma mates, ye ken the yins I'm talking about, they're like

**Billy** Aye

**Brian** They get it, like, every night an' that. No' that I think it's addictive, I think they just want tae dae it

**Billy** Aye, 'cause if you're addicted - its no' like smack or that, you dinnae need to go to rehab or that (laugh). If you go to rehab it's addictive

**Brian** Cold turkey (laugh)

**Billy** Aye, see, you dinnae start shaking and that 'cause you dinnae get anything

**Int** You can't get addicted to cannabis?

**Bruce (15)** Aye, definitely

**Int** Do you agree with that one?

**Bruce** I know a lot of folk that wake up, I know, like, junkies and that, they used to take heroin, they're on methadone now and a' this. Like wake up to a joint to buy hash

**Int** So you reckon it is addictive?

**Bruce** It is addictive, definitely

**Bret (15)** If you're a constant user

**Bruce** Just if you're a druggie

**Bret** Once you start it, I mean its no' easy to stop - if you've got the willpower, eventually you will dae it

On a methodological note, this particular question could have been framed in a clearer way since the use of the negative invites an ambiguous response. These accounts do, nonetheless, appear to clearly associate 'addiction' with a very particular pattern of drug use and not with participants' own recreational use of cannabis. Other young people, though, tend to use cigarette smoking as their reference point for understanding addiction as it relates to cannabis. These accounts acknowledge that nicotine, an addictive substance, links both behaviours, but in some instances, there is some degree of confusion about what exactly is responsible for causing 'addiction':

**Int** So the first one then - you can't get addicted to cannabis?

**David (13)** I disagree

**Des (13)** Disagree

**Int** Both disagree?

**David** Usually get addicted to smoking and it's the same, 'cause it's got the nicotine in it. And I think there's also something in cannabis, probably get you addicted as well

**Briony (14)** See, I think if you have a joint, I think the most dangerous thing in it is the nicotine because, like, it's meant to be better than, hash is meant to be better than nicotine and stuff, so

Other accounts, while acknowledging the nicotine link, seem to distinguish between different levels of dependence. In common with earlier accounts, this view regards cigarettes, but not cannabis as highly addictive:

- Int** What about this one - you can't get addicted to cannabis?
- Damien (15)** You kin 'cause you get addicted to fags cause it's nicotine, so
- Darren (15)** I feel you can't. Even a lot of people that have smoked it for years can just, they just say, oh, "I could quit right now". If you say quit for a week then and they'll do it, nae problem. But if you ask them to quit a fag for a week, they'll just, like, aye. They'll try their hardest but they probably won't get through
- Damien** Aye, probably they'll, they can quit hash, like, but if you really like the feeling you're like, nah, I like the same old feeling, like, so I willnae quit it 'cause I like it. So it just depends what people like, how long they've been smoking it for
- Darren** People want tae stay smoking or if they want tae quit it, like, people'll try their hardest to quit, like. But it's a lot easier to quit I'd say, nae bother

An alternative perspective on the relationship between cannabis and 'addiction' was offered by some of the non-cannabis users. From this perspective, 'addiction' is framed in much broader terms and cannabis is seen as just as addictive as cigarettes. In common with some of the cannabis users', though, these accounts also use a 'stress discourse' to explain why young people use cannabis:

- Int** O.K., you can't get addicted to cannabis?
- Natasha (15)** Naw, I think that's wrong
- Naomi (15)** I think, yeah, I think you can, I think you can get addicted to anything - you can get addicted to alcohol, drugs, yeah
- Natasha** It disnae matter, even if it's really not strong to start with, you do get addicted, I think
- Naomi** You can get addicted to loads of things
- Natasha** I think it would be dead easy as well
- Naomi** You get addicted to things you enjoy
- Natasha** If it makes you feel relaxed and you feel like it's taking away your problems
- Naomi** Aye, I think that's why probably most people do take it
- Natasha** Especially now, like, a lot more people are taking it now than what did in first year I think, 'cause you never really heard about it in first year, but now it's so much. I think it's because of the exams and
- Naomi** Aye, stress at school, and maybe family problems as well

As noted in an earlier chapter, some young people with little or no experience of cannabis, tend to hold apparently exaggerated views about the potential dangers

associated with cannabis. In their eyes, cannabis is highly addictive and can even kill, a view at least partly informed, according to other parts of their accounts, by drugs education sessions at school:

- Norm (13)** They think it's a' right, its no' gonnae dae anything tae you. It's no' - it could kill you
- Nicholas (13)** Aye, and if somebody tries it, they get addicted tae it, they'll never stop
- Norm** See, loads of people our age smoke it
- Int** Right, and you were saying there, Nicholas, that once folk try it they get addicted?
- Nicholas** Aye
- Int** Do you think it is a very addictive thing, cannabis?
- Nicholas** Aye
- Norm** Aye, I think once you've started once, if you dae it once and then you'll no' want tae dae it again, but when you keep on daein' it
- Nicholas** You'll just get, aye
- Norm** Keep on daein' it

- Int** O.K., you can't get addicted to cannabis?
- Nat (14)** Aye you can, easily
- Niamh (13)** It can kill you
- Int** How much do you think you'd need to use it to get addicted?
- Niamh** Every day for about
- Nat** Nup, you'd take it at the week-ends and then you'd get it every day, and then after a couple of weeks or months, that'd be you into it. It's just a waste of money

It is perhaps not surprising that there are differences in how young people view the concept of 'addiction' depending upon their relationship with cannabis. Young cannabis users have their own personal experience to draw upon, and as noted earlier, acknowledging a vulnerability to addiction in relation to cigarettes may well offer some young people an excuse not to address their smoking behaviour. With cannabis, though, young cannabis users may be more reluctant to link addiction with their own recreational cannabis use either because they feel it is irrelevant, or because it would not be in their interests to do so for social reasons. As noted above, however, both sets of accounts to some extent shared a 'stress discourse', at least in relation to heavier, more problematic cannabis use. Both sets of accounts also shared a tendency to use an 'effects discourse' to differentiate cannabis from cigarettes. So while cigarettes are linked explicitly with nicotine and addiction, cannabis gets you 'high':



- Int** O.K., smoking a cigarette is much the same as smoking a joint?
- Nat (14)** Nup
- Niamh (13)** Nup, there's mair nicotine in a fag. Like, there's stuff that gets you high in a joint
- Int** Right, some people have said to me, it's kind of different, it's not the same as a cigarette?
- Nicol (15)** Well, a cigarette, you take a draw of it and just dae it 'cause you're addicted, but wi' hash it's like a high, and it's, like, stronger
- Int** What's the same, what's different about these two things or what's the same about them, would you say?
- Norrie (15)** Well, smoking fags disnae really dae anything to you except
- Nash (15)** You can get addicted to them, and calms your nerves
- Int** Calms your nerves, uhu?
- Norrie** And, hash, like, gets you stoned
- Int** What do you think's the difference between smoking cigarettes and smoking cannabis?
- Britney (13)** Well, there's the effects
- Billie (13)** Yeah
- Britney** You know, cannabis gets you high and everything and
- Billie** And you feel anxious, and you get the munchies (laugh) and tired the next day and everything
- Britney** And smoking is more of a sort of daily thing and just gives you, what's the word, sort of, a sort of feeling of craving. And cannabis is actually, gives you actually, effects

This tendency for young people to link cigarette smoking with 'addiction', on the one hand, and cannabis with 'effects', on the other, perhaps helps to further explain the contrast between participants' use of this concept in relation to both behaviours. So although there is an acknowledgement that cannabis also results in exposure to nicotine, and hence also poses an 'addiction' risk, this seems to be less important than getting 'high'. As noted earlier, many young people also view cannabis predominantly as a youthful activity of mainly social origin and hence the idea of becoming addicted and trying to stop does not make any sense since the assumption is that in a few years' time, it will no longer be relevant to their lives.

### **Cannabis as 'therapy'**

Given the current public debate about the medical use of cannabis, it is perhaps not surprising that many participants referred to the therapeutic qualities of cannabis. However, what did come as a surprise, was the view, expressed right across the

sample, that cannabis can somehow undo some of the damage caused by cigarette smoking. As discussed in an earlier chapter, other young people, including older siblings, can sometimes act as a source of lay knowledge about cannabis. As local 'experts' with real experience of drugs and drug taking, they can pass on 'urban myths' which transmit knowledge about both the positive and negative effects of drugs. As we have already seen, official messages about drugs and danger can be unhelpful and confusing, and as a result, these lay sources often have a credibility and salience which other sources of knowledge lack (Shiner & Newburn, 1997). While young people apparently put their faith in official accounts about the dangers of tobacco, it is sometimes unclear where their knowledge about the supposed therapeutic qualities of cannabis comes from:

- Int** Uhu, and you were saying that you thought cigarettes were more dangerous?
- Norman (14)** Aye
- Int** How come?
- Norman** Because you see it on the news an' that. Cigarettes is mair danger to getting lung cancer an' that, than hash, eh. Because, like, hash is diluting the tobacco doon, eh. Well, that's another word for it, 'diluting', eh?
- Int** Diluting, uhu?
- Norman** Aye. Like if you take a cigarette, right, and then you smoke a joint straight efter it, a' the smoke fae the cigarette gets like, killed an' that on the way doon fae the hash smoke and that, eh, so

Although this idea seems relatively widespread, the majority of young people who expressed it, seemed tentative and uncertain about its accuracy, particularly when prompted to clarify the origin of their belief:

- Int** Right, so would you say that smoking a fag is much the same as smoking a joint?
- Billy (13)** Nup 'cause fags can kill you, fags can kill you
- Brian (15)** So can joints, 'cause they've still got
- Billy** Naw, but it's like mixing, and it takes a' the impurities oot o' the fag and makes it pure so it's just like pure, so, it's good
- Int** Uhu, and where did you hear that?
- Billy** Eh?
- Int** Where did you hear about what you were just saying?
- Billy** I just ken that

As noted earlier, in some cases, it is older siblings who are responsible for perpetuating this myth. Coming from a respected source of lay knowledge, this idea enjoys a degree of credibility but at the same time, there is a lack of certainty and

perhaps some scepticism about its accuracy:

- Int** O.K., using cannabis is good for your health - have you heard that before?
- Neal (14)** Aye, it clears your lungs or something, I've heard that it clears your lungs, it's good for arthritis and that stuff
- Int** Where did you hear that it clears your lungs - is it just like a story that goes about?
- Nathan (13)** My brother
- Neal** Is that true?
- 
- Robert (14)** Smoking hash is better for you than smoking actual normal fags, well folk say so
- Int** Yeah, why do you think that is?
- Rose (15)** 'Cause it clears your airways or something - I dinnae ken, that's what I got telt
- Int** Yeah, where did you hear that from?
- Rose** My brother, that's what he says to me

A few participants, while aware of this myth, are clearly not convinced. Others balance this supposed benefit with a potential risk to health. It is difficult to be certain where the participants heard about the potential for cannabis to cause memory loss. Since these particular boys reported using relatively large amounts of cannabis on a regular, weekly basis, it is possible that their view may be partly informed by personal experience:

- Nat (14)** I've heard folk say, ken, that it is good for you because it clears your lungs oot an' that, but it disnae
- 
- Int** So what do you think's worse for you - cigarettes or hash?
- Rob (13)** Fags - hash is like, when you smoke a joint, it's supposed to like, clear your system, of tar an' that, your lungs an' that
- Ray (13)** Aye, but it does something tae the brain
- Int** What does it do to the brain?
- Ray** It gies ye
- Rob** Memory loss
- Ray** Like memory loss - kills parts of the brain
- Int** Right
- Ray** If you smoke it a lot, really a lot
- Rob** Ye cannae remember stuff that much - that's the only thing really it does tae ye

Most, but not all, of these accounts were provided by participants who themselves use cannabis. Amongst this group of young people, it would appear that there's a general view that cannabis is less harmful than cigarettes. In some cases, this view seems to derive from a myth, perpetuated by trusted and respected local figures, that cannabis somehow has the potential to undo some of the damage caused by cigarette smoking. How this myth gained currency in the first place is hard to say, but it seems likely that it may be a response to the continual bombardment of 'official' messages about cannabis which are often confusing and unhelpful. On the basis of these data, it is difficult to be certain about how holding this belief may affect young people's cannabis use, but it seems reasonable to assume that it may to some degree help to legitimise or support their involvement in this behaviour, particularly in the light of recent changes in the legal status of cannabis. Additional data from this study also suggest that young people's cannabis use may, in a number of respects, actually support their cigarette smoking behaviour, and it is to these data that the remainder of this chapter now turns.

### **The role of cannabis in supporting young people's cigarette smoking**

As noted earlier, many participants in this study, particularly boys, appear to use both cannabis and cigarettes. This is consistent with research evidence which has shown cannabis to be particularly prevalent among cigarette smokers (Miller & Plant, 1996, Todd, Currie & Smith, 1999). As noted earlier, much of the earlier research shows that young people are introduced to cannabis through smoking cigarettes, but recent findings suggest that today, cannabis may introduce some people to tobacco and subsequently to cigarette smoking (Albutt et al, 1995, Bell et al, 1998). Data from this study offers some support for this idea, and suggests a number of other ways in which young people's cannabis use may actually support their cigarette smoking.

In some cases, at first glance, it seems more accurate to view this relationship as acting in the opposite direction, that is, it is the ready availability of cigarettes that feeds and sustains young people's cannabis use. From this perspective, being a cigarette smoker is central to being a cannabis user. However, although using tobacco clearly seems to facilitate and enhance the experience of smoking cannabis joints, it seems reasonable to argue that young people's involvement with cannabis also acts to encourage their continued cigarette smoking behaviour. Thus, although some young people express ambivalent feelings about smoking, they may be reluctant to give cigarettes up because of their role in supporting their cannabis use:



- Bruce (15)** I'm always smoking, like, all my mates usually smoke 'cause smokers are always equipped, you've always got a lighter for making hash and if we've got fags we don't need to go out and buy fags
- Bret (15)** Also, you normally put three skins together for a joint and you normally roche it by using a bit of cardboard and you have to use, well, that's what's mainly used (shows interviewer the pokey bit out of his cigarette lighter), ken the pokey bit to push it in
- Int** Would you say that smoking a joint isn't really smoking?
- Bret (15)** Well, it is tobacco, it's smoking - unless it's just straight hash but that's stupid
- Bruce (15)** Naw, you cannae dae that, though - hot rocks everywhere - 'cause you need the tobacco to make it smoke 'cause if you've just got the hash and you crumble it in
- Bret** Plus, the hash'll taste really crap
- Bruce** Aye, it'll just burn your mouth, and, like, you get things called hot rocks. Folk keep smoking fags 'cause they're cheaper. I don't like smoking, well I like smoking fags but I don't like smoking fags, it's shite

It is difficult to be certain about what Bruce's apparently contradictory feelings about his cigarette smoking mean. Perhaps he enjoys some aspects of the experience but dislikes others. It would appear, though, that so long as cigarettes continue to be useful to his cannabis habit, he is likely to continue using tobacco, in spite of his mixed feelings. As noted earlier, cannabis may also introduce some young people, against their better judgement, to tobacco and subsequently to cigarettes:

- Int** So did you smoke cigarettes before you smoked hash?
- Neal (14)** Nup - I started smoking hash first, then I started - I didnae like smoking fags, I didn't like fags, but then I just started smoking them

A further extract from this interview reveals that both Neal and his interview partner have tried to stop smoking cigarettes but have apparently abandoned their efforts. He seems to implicate their involvement with cannabis in their failure to successfully address their smoking habit. According to this argument, since a joint contains not only cannabis, but also the constituents of a cigarette, there's no point in giving up cigarettes:

- Nathan (14)** I tried giein' up smoking, stopping, a week ago, eh?
- Neal (14)** I stopped, I stopped for about a month
- Nathan** But then we just started again
- Int** Yeah, how come you both started again?
- Neal** Its 'cause you don't have money or else you'd try and stop it and when you're smoking the hash, the fag's still in the hash, so I dinnae really see the difference

Two other participants talked about starting with cannabis and then progressing to tobacco and subsequently to cigarettes. It is important to note that these participants are unusual in this study because their account revealed that their cannabis use took place largely in the context of being violently bullied by an older lad. Now that this individual has left the area, both participants claim to have stopped using both cannabis and cigarettes. Nonetheless, their account highlights the potential for cannabis to introduce some young people to cigarette smoking. It also suggests that cigarettes may also be used as a substitute when cannabis is not available:

- Barry (13)** I had hash before like I even had a draw of a fag, but I've had a joint an' that, but then I tried fags
- Brad (13)** I had joints before I started smoking - when I couldn't get the hash I smoked fags
- Int** So you started on the hash, Brad, then you got onto fags after that, yeah?
- Brad** Uhu
- Int** And you were saying, Barry, that you started on the hash as well? So how did you end up going on to cigarettes after that?
- Barry** Eh, well I started trying hash, and cigarettes cannae be any worse, so

For most, but not all, non-cannabis users, the suggestion that young people may start with cannabis and progress to cigarettes did not appear to make much sense. Most cannabis users, however, while not sharing the experience themselves, either talked about knowing people who have progressed from cannabis to cigarettes, or at least indicated that this progression route made sense to them:

- Int** Do you think anybody starts with hash and then moves onto cigarettes?
- Norman (14)** That's what my mum did actually - she started wi' hash and then moved on to cigarettes
- Barry (13)** Aye, there was lot of folk smoke hash at the school that dinnae smoke fags and sometimes you'll see them smoking a fag because they havenae got any hash or they cannae get any hash

As noted earlier, a prior dislike of cigarettes does not appear to prevent some young people from beginning to smoke cigarettes as a substitute when cannabis is not available. Some participants appear to understand this substitute role of cigarettes in terms of nicotine dependence:

**Robert (14)** Aye, I ken somebody that never smoked and now they smoke. Like, he always smoked joints really funny and I only seen for the first time, I think it was last Friday, here, and he was smoking a fag, and I thought that was really strange, that he hated smoking before it, and now that he had joints and he was getting the nicotine, he started to smoke fags

**Rose (15)** That's mair for the joints, but if you're, like, smoking bongs an' that, ye ken, there's nae point in smoking fags, like, but if you're smoking joints, ken it's like a fag and some folk get like urges for a joint and that'll be like, a fag will be like a replacement for that - 'cause it's, like, you're still taking the draw

**Int** So, do you think sometimes folk start with hash and then  
**Nicol (15)** Aye, well, think about it, you put in a fag in a joint, and nicotine's addictive, so if you smoke hash but often you've no' got a joint, you'll just take a fag and then you'll just start smoking

Other young people appear to understand the substitute function of cigarettes in social terms rather than seeing it as being linked to nicotine-related dependence:

**Rob (13)** Aye, I ken a couple of folk

**Ray (13)** David

**Rob** Aye, he just smoked hash and he hated the smoke but now he's smoking fags

**Int** Yeah - why do you think he did that?

**Rob** 'Cause you get bored with no' smoking hash a' the time, you're no' allowed to smoke so you just buy fags

**Int** Right, so, like, a bit of a substitute or something?

**Rob** Aye

So it would appear that some young cannabis users smoke cigarettes as a substitute when cannabis is not available. Others seem to imply that being a cigarette smoker offers another advantage - that of conserving cannabis supplies. Since Neal appears to use cannabis, not just socially, but also as a therapeutic aid to get to sleep, it may be that this goal of conserving cannabis is more important for those young people who use cannabis in this very particular way:

**Nathan (13)** It's just like if you're wanting to hang on to a little bit and you've got fags, you can keep some

**Neal (14)** Just leave a bit for the morn's morning or something, or a bit for your sleep. That's what's good about it, puts you straight to sleep - nae hassles

Some accounts suggest, though, that cannabis and cigarettes are not always smoked

concurrently. The particular way in which cannabis is used seems to play a role in determining the likelihood of young people also smoking cigarettes in the context of a cannabis session. So while smoking joints is compatible with smoking cigarettes, more potent methods of using cannabis are apparently not:

- Int** And do you think folk smoke, like, do you smoke cigarettes at the same kind of time as you're smoking hash - or is that different the way you smoke cigarettes?
- Ray (13)** Depends, like if I hae a joint, I'll smoke efter the joint - but if I've had a mix. It depends, like, if you're having a mix, it's, like, it feels a' weird efter havin' a fag efter that
- Rob (13)** If you take a bong, an' you smoke a fag, it just means ye dinnae smoke it, it's just mingin'
- Ray** Efter a joint, like, it's no' as strong as when you're taking a bong, you can smoke efter that if you like

Other participants provided a different perspective on the relationship between cannabis and cigarettes. Some young people talked about this relationship in terms of cannabis having the potential to increase or decrease young people's cigarette smoking, although how this works seems to depend on the particular circumstances:

- Int** How many would you say you smoke?
- Rob (13)** Ten a day
- Ray (13)** Five, 'cause you go halfers on them
- Rob** Aye, we go halfers and we get five each. It just a' depends if you've got enough money, 'cause ye cannae afford fags sometimes if you're smoking hash every week
- Int** Right
- Rob** 'Cause if you're buying hash, you've no' got enough money to buy fags
- Int** Right, so if you just had a certain amount of money what would you choose to spend it on?
- Rob** Hash
- Int** Sometimes young people who've never smoked cigarettes before try cannabis and then end up being a regular cigarette smoker. Have you come across that before?
- Mary (16)** Shona, did she smoke fags beforehand?
- Mel (16)** She would sometimes, but she probably smokes spliffs more rather than she does cigarettes
- Mary** Yeah, I know she still, well actually
- Mel** I wouldn't say that she was a smoker, but she now smokes more cigarettes than she used to



**Mary** I think it's because of the physical thing of holding something and being able to smoke it. I mean to me that's more than the actual effects

While the data presented above is far from extensive, it does appear to add to the growing evidence that for some young people, cannabis may encourage some non-smokers to use tobacco and subsequently, take up cigarette smoking. These data also provide new insights into the relationship between cannabis and existing cigarette smoking behaviour. It would appear, for example, that cigarettes are often used as a substitute when cannabis is not available, and as a way of conserving cannabis supplies. Being a cigarette smoker also 'equips' some young people with the paraphernalia required to have a cannabis session at short notice and with minimum disruption, and in this respect, it would appear that their cigarette smoking is central to their cannabis use. Since most of the accounts in this section came from interviews with male participants, it would appear that the relationship between cigarettes and cannabis is particularly salient for boys, who in the context of this study at least, were much more likely than girls to use both substances.

### **Summary**

This chapter has focused on exploring data relating to how young people distinguish between cannabis and cigarettes and how they view the relationship between these behaviours. It has revealed an ambiguity in how young people talk about this relationship, in particular, ideas about 'addiction' and relative 'harm'. To some extent, participants talked about 'addiction' both in terms of physical dependence and in social terms in relation to both cigarettes and cannabis. In terms of smoking cessation, many participants seemed to imply that social, as well as physiological factors, contributed in a significant way to their failure to quit cigarettes. This has particular relevance for current health programmes which rely primarily on the provision of nicotine replacement therapy to young people as a key strategy in supporting cessation efforts. Young people's talk about the social aspects of addiction in this study, and in others, suggest that such programmes are unlikely to be effective unless they are accompanied by initiatives which address the continuing smoking behaviour of peers.

Data from this study also seem to suggest that young cannabis users see nicotine dependence as being much more closely linked with cigarette smoking than it is with cannabis use, which they associate predominantly with getting 'high'. Non-cannabis users, on the other hand, tend to view cannabis as highly addictive. Some

participants also appear to believe that cannabis is predominantly a youthful activity that they will grow out of naturally, and that far from being a harmful activity, smoking cannabis actually reverses some of the damage caused by cigarette smoking. It seems likely that these beliefs serve both to reinforce the idea that nicotine dependence is less of an issue with cannabis than it is with cigarettes and to legitimise their cannabis use. The final part of the chapter presented data which suggest that cannabis may even support and encourage young people's cigarette smoking. For some, it may introduce them to cigarette smoking, for others, it may sustain and even increase their cigarette consumption through a number of pathways. Given the current reclassification of cannabis, and the high proportion of young people who are continuing to experiment with both behaviours, this clearly has important implications for public health.

## **CHAPTER 9:        DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This study has set out to more fully understand young people's cannabis use. It has generated data by conducting thirty semi-structured interviews with a sample of Scottish 13-15 year olds in youth club settings, mostly in self-selected friendship pairs. Taking the social contexts of young people's lives as its starting point, it has attempted to shed light on the role of cannabis in young people's lives by developing a model which allowed for an exploration of four key contexts - family, peers, local neighbourhood and broader aspects of culture. The data generated on this last context relates in particular to the relevance for young people of the ongoing debate on cannabis regulation, and their perspectives on the role of popular media in shaping young people's cannabis related beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. An additional data chapter discussing the links between cannabis and cigarettes reflects the study's aim of shedding further light on how young people's cannabis use may support and sustain their cigarette smoking behaviour. This final chapter will critically summarise the findings from these data chapters, describing how each chapter developed, and exploring how aspects of methodology contributed to the generation of these data. This summary is organised around these five chapter headings, although many issues cut across several contexts, and whenever appropriate these links are highlighted in the discussion. The chapter will conclude by summarising the key implications of the study for health promotion research, policy and practice.

### **The family context**

Although peers and friends are particularly significant in young people's lives throughout their early teenage years, findings from this study confirm the important role that families play in helping to shape health-related beliefs and behaviour. Little is known about how young people's cannabis use is managed within the family context, and in order to shed light on this, participants were asked what would happen if their parents found out about their cannabis use. The perspectives of non-users on adult attitudes to young people's cannabis use were also explored. An analysis of these data form the basis for the first main theme explored in this chapter. The second theme - the role of older siblings in influencing the cannabis related beliefs and behaviour of younger family members - emerged in a less direct way in the context of participants discussing various aspects of their cannabis use.

### *'Knowing' and 'getting caught'*

Interviewing research participants in self-selected friendship pairs proved to be a very fruitful approach to generating data on the first theme. Many boys in particular, appeared to relish the opportunity of reflecting on how parents 'know' or 'don't know' about their cannabis use, and sharing accounts about what might happen if they were 'caught', often using colourful, apparently exaggerated language to describe this sort of confrontation. Accessing young people's accounts in this way seems to mimic to a certain extent, some aspects of how young people relate to one another in social situations. Drawing on this particular strength, this method was able to reveal the apparently ambiguous nature of young cannabis users' perceptions about their parents' 'knowledge' of their cannabis use. Overwhelmingly, these participants appeared to believe that parents 'knowing' about their cannabis use, and responding to this knowledge, was problematic. As noted above, they often used exaggerated language to describe what might happen if they were actually 'caught', but what constituted 'knowledge' of their cannabis use and what 'getting caught' actually involved, were far from clear. Some cannabis users even seemed to imply that their parents would rather not know. It may be that this ambiguity reflects a reluctance on the part of parents to respond, and if this is the case, it is important to understand why.

Accounts from non-cannabis users revealed no such ambiguity. These participants appeared to express the view that parents would act decisively if they were ever to find out that their children were using cannabis. Of course, since these participants do not themselves currently use cannabis, this view is based on hypothetical speculation. It is difficult to be certain about what this apparent difference may mean, particularly in the context of a relatively small study. It is also important to be clear that these data relate solely to young people's perspectives, not those of parents. However, taken together with the finding that non-users for the most part tend to avoid street-based leisure cultures, it may be that these young people have less experience than other, more 'street-wise' young people, of managing potentially confrontational situations with their parents. This may help to explain why they tend not to problematise this issue in the same way as cannabis users seem to. However, only by talking to parents themselves can we hope to find out more about how they are likely to, and how they may have actually, responded to knowledge of their children's cannabis use.

Cannabis users' accounts also suggested that parental concerns were focused around issues of criminality rather than health, and that the major fear for parents was the



police turning up at their door. A recent paper exploring cannabis and social identity discusses how cannabis is socially constructed (Hammersely et al, 2001). One such construction punishes getting caught but encourages the invocation of mitigating circumstances as excuses. Thus, Bill Clinton's claim that "I didn't inhale", enabled him to deflect criticism and avoid irreparable damage to his reputation. Perhaps the ambiguous way participants in this study talked about this works in a similar way. Public debates and media coverage of cannabis, most recently the decision to reclassify cannabis, also tend to be characterised by ambiguity. On the one hand, the downgrading of cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug implies a more liberal approach, but on the other, possession remains illegal, albeit no longer necessarily an arrestable offence. Thus, public responses to cannabis when officially 'discovered', irrespective of the individual views of the person who does the discovering, can still result in punishment and exclusion. Young cannabis users' use of ambiguous language in this context perhaps represents an acknowledgement of the tension that may exist between parents' private views and relationship with cannabis, on the one hand, and their public obligation to respond punitively if they catch one of their children in the act, on the other. This would explain participants' comments about parents 'knowing' but 'not knowing', as well as their exaggerated descriptions of what might happen to them if they get 'caught'.

It is interesting to compare this finding with research on parental responses to young people's drinking. Far from waiting until their hand is forced, or ignoring knowledge of their children's cannabis use unless evidence of this behaviour is certain and realised, it would appear that parents overwhelmingly adopt a pro-active, harm reduction approach to their children's drinking. Other studies have found that this may be part of a bargaining process designed to discourage young people's involvement in more 'risky' behaviours, such as experimenting with illegal drugs (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). In this way, the appearance of drugs as a threat to young people's well-being appears to have had the curious effect of making alcohol misuse more acceptable for many parents and their offspring. In the present study, what parents appeared to fear most was the social costs of excessive drinking, in particular, the potential for police involvement. On this one point, the data on cannabis and alcohol seem to converge, but while alcohol occupies a cultural position as 'normal' and 'acceptable' and whose impact, both short and long term, is understood, it would appear that drugs, cannabis included, are not necessarily easily understood by young people or their parents. Perhaps parents feel that they can 'control' alcohol use whereas drugs create a fear that their use may not be controllable

or predictable. Of course, as noted above, in the present study, we only have young people's accounts to go on, and these data are therefore limited in what they can tell us about the role that parents play in shaping young people's health choices. Only by reviewing existing family research evidence and talking to parents themselves, will it be possible to gain insights into how different parenting styles and other factors relating to parents' own health beliefs and behaviour, work together to influence young people's substance use.

These findings are particularly interesting in the context of two recent developments. The decision to downgrade cannabis raises questions about the effect this may have on how parents and young people conceptualise cannabis. How might their views on the 'risks' involved change, and what impact might this have on how 'knowledge' of young people's cannabis use is managed within the family context? In Scotland, recent advice suggests that once this change is implemented, the police will continue to have powers of arrest for cannabis possession depending on the circumstances of the case. People apprehended by the police and found to be in possession of cannabis may be charged with the offence, and in all cases, the drug will be seized as evidence. The matter will then be reported to the Procurator Fiscal who will decide whether to proceed with a prosecution or to issue a fiscal fine or a warning (Scottish Executive, 2002). This advice seems to suggest that nothing much will change, although it remains to be seen how the new law is enforced and how this change affects the views and behaviour of both young people and parents. The second development relates to the increasing emphasis of government policy on parental duties and responsibilities as part of their overall strategy for tackling youth crime and truancy. As noted in a recent investigation of parents, teenagers and family life, the task of parenting often takes place outside the household itself, and is shaped by the social networks that parents and families have access to (Seaman, 2002). Not all parents are equally well-placed in this regard, and this clearly limits the potential for parents to exercise control over their children's risk behaviours. Young people can themselves be active in the parenting process, and recent studies have shown that child disclosure is more effective than parental monitoring (Kerr, Stattin & Trost, 1999, Stattin & Kerr, 2000). It seems appropriate, therefore, that policies aimed at encouraging parents to assume greater responsibility for their children's behaviour, in this instance, their cannabis use, should take these contexts into account.

### *The role of older siblings*

The second key finding that emerged from the chapter on family relates to the role of older siblings in shaping young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. Data from this study seem to clearly implicate older siblings as active agents in various aspects of the cannabis use of their younger brothers and sisters. In some instances, older siblings were instrumental in introducing participants to cannabis, in other cases, they supplied the cannabis, and acted as a buffer between the young person and the 'dealer' further up the chain. In some cases, older siblings also provided a credit facility, making cannabis available to younger siblings who would otherwise have been unable to afford it. A current, ongoing study on pre-teen drug use highlights the particular significance of close social relationships in exerting influence on young people's drug use. In this study, the closer the social relationship (in some cases, older siblings) the harder it was for participants to manage an offer of drugs (McIntosh et al, 2002c). This study has also found that children with a drug-using family member are five times more likely to try drugs themselves (McKeganey, 2002).

Older siblings, mainly brothers, also seemed to be local 'experts' on cannabis, often acting as influential sources of lay knowledge about cannabis. One 'myth' in particular seemed to gain currency in this way - the idea that cannabis is not only less harmful than cigarette smoking, it also somehow acts to combat, or even reverse, some of the detrimental effects of smoking. In the present study, participants, for example, described how cannabis 'clears your airways' and 'takes the impurities out the fag'. Another drugs study has highlighted how young people may find the continual bombardment of 'official' messages about drugs and danger to be unhelpful and confusing (Shiner & Newburn, 1997). As a result, young people sometimes rely on more local and experiential sources such as 'urban myths and stories' which transmit knowledge about both the positive and negative effects of drugs. Based on local experts' real experience of drugs and drug taking, these sources have a credibility and salience which other sources of knowledge may lack. In the case of this cannabis study, it seems likely that as well as this 'urban myth' about cannabis, broader issues, in particular the ongoing debate about the medical use of cannabis for therapeutic purposes also played a role in the construction of their beliefs about cannabis. Overwhelmingly, participants supported the legalisation of cannabis for this purpose, often describing media coverage of this issue and highlighting the injustice of people suffering from diseases like cancer and multiple sclerosis being subject to legal sanction for using cannabis to alleviate their symptoms. Many participants also compared cannabis favourably with other drug

use, both licit and illicit. For example, some described how the police often have to be called to youth club discos to deal with drunken young people, and others related stories of relatives dying of lung cancer or becoming alcoholics. Most participants, cannabis users and non-users alike, also drew a distinction between cannabis and other hard drugs, viewing recreational, moderate use of cannabis as largely benign. In this way, young people's views about cannabis were embedded in personal experience as well as being informed by older family members and the wider public debate.

These insights into the role of older siblings in shaping young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour seem to have two important implications - both in relation to drugs education. So long as young people experience 'official' messages about drugs as unhelpful, inconsistent and confusing, they will continue to rely on alternative sources of knowledge, knowledge which is rooted in the everyday experiences of respected local 'experts' such as older siblings. This suggests that the approach currently being pursued by the recently launched anti-drugs campaign 'Know the Score' to provide accurate and relevant information about illegal drugs is a positive development (SE, 2002). Young people may find it easier to relate such information to their own experience, and this, in turn, may encourage them to have more faith in drugs education, and more effectively enable them to make informed choices about illegal drugs. Given the significant role that many older siblings seem to play, it may also be appropriate to include a broad range of activities which both raise awareness of family issues and helps young people to develop the skills to manage cannabis offers made in this context.

### **The peer context**

The key argument developed in this chapter was that there may be a gendered dimension to young people's cannabis use, with cannabis playing a more significant role for more boys than girls (although not in all cases), particularly in the context of street-based leisure cultures. The significance of gender differences as an important factor emerged at an early stage as male and female cannabis users offered accounts which seemed to suggest that they had qualitatively different kinds of relationship with cannabis. The interview method played a key role in helping these kinds of difference to emerge. The choice of most participants to be interviewed in same sex friendship pairs provided a useful context within which pairs of girls could discuss their views on boys and their risk taking, and vice versa. An analysis of these data also highlighted apparent variations and showed how boys in particular drew upon



gendered ideas to explain their views on young people's cannabis use. This chapter suggested that these variations may be partly to do with the nature of boys' friendships which can often lead them to aspire to particular types of social identity which, for some boys, can be achieved by using cannabis. These findings introduce the possibility that cannabis use may be more gendered than the survey data suggest. These data show a slightly higher proportion of boys than girls reporting using cannabis (Miller & Plant, 1996, ONS, 1999) but are ill equipped to uncover and explain apparent gender differences in cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. Another recent qualitative cannabis study (Amos et al, 2002) seems to confirm apparent gender differences which go beyond simple prevalence rates, although this remains a tentative finding requiring further investigation.

### *Cannabis and social image*

From this perspective, the cannabis use of many of the boys in the study can best be understood as a symbolic behaviour, allowing them to present themselves in certain ways to others and to reflexively construct their own self-image. They were able to see themselves and present an image of themselves, for example, as someone who takes risks - someone who is a bit rebellious - a bit of a 'jack the lad'. In some cases, these 'risks' were directly associated with cannabis itself. For those participants who were at an early stage in their experimentation with cannabis, knowledge and experience of different methods of using cannabis was highly valued and talked about a lot. A few of these participants also spontaneously referred to media coverage linking cannabis with high profile figures in the music industry. Their apparent regard for these musicians as role models allowed them to associate themselves with the 'bad boy' image enjoyed by people like Dr. Dre and Robbie Williams. For other more experienced participants, and for those operating in a context where using cannabis was akin to conforming to social norms, their 'risk' taking identity tended to be associated with the opportunities their cannabis use presented for getting into conflict situations with figures of authority. These participants recounted stories of baiting the police or going home 'stoned' and having to outwit parents. In this way, these participants appeared to use cannabis as a way of conveying an image of self-determination, control and individuality. But as well as helping them to 'stick out' in terms of individuality and self-expression, their cannabis use also seemed to foster feelings of shared identity and social belonging. Thus, some participants talked fondly about experiences with cannabis, good and bad, that they had shared with friends. In this context, slagging off peers for having a coughing fit or for 'gouching out' took on a different meaning. Far from signifying

competitive behaviour, some participants described this in terms of a bonding experience. So, it would appear that for some boys, using cannabis provides a means of helping them to manage the paradox of the felt need to 'fit in' and the felt need to 'stick out' (Miles et al, 1998).

Cigarette smoking has also been shown to perform this function (Denscombe, 2001). One recent study, for example, has shown how young people appear to differentiate conceptually between adults' and young people's smoking (Rugkasa et al, 2001). While adults smoke to cope with life and hence lack control over their smoking, young people smoke in order to achieve the status of 'cool' or 'hard' and to gain group membership. From this perspective, smoking appears to be a key signifier of power and status, and this has important implications for those young people who wish to avoid smoking without compromising their personal identity (Plumridge et al, 2002). According to this study, boys can establish alternatives to 'smoker cool' through physical activity - girls, on the other hand, have little choice but to accept their inferior status. It would appear that girls are struggling with fewer social resources than boys to accredit themselves, and that addressing this imbalance is an important challenge for programmes which seek to achieve a reduction in the comparatively higher uptake of smoking among girls.

In other instances, cannabis appeared to provide a route for achieving peer status and recognition. Consistent with recent insights from the smoking literature (Michell, 1997, Michell & Amos, 1997), some peer groups appeared to be structured by social hierarchies, and in this context, cannabis may have been used as a means of jockeying for social status. For example, being able to demonstrate prowess with a range of methods for using cannabis and being able to smoke copious amounts was a way of achieving peer status. For one younger boy, using an accident compensation payment to finance his peers' cannabis use as well as his own enabled him to operate on an equal footing with older, more experienced peer group members. In common with other studies which have focused on peer pressure, with one exception, there was little evidence in the present study that coercive forms of peer pressure were a significant factor in young people's cannabis use (Coggans & McKellar, 1994, Denscombe, 2002, McIntosh et al, 2002b). This is not to say, however, that other, more subtle forms of influence were not at work, for example, as noted above, 'fitting it' with peers was an important social goal for some of these young cannabis users. For others, cannabis was also a way of achieving recognition and gaining a reputation beyond their immediate social circles - from this perspective, using

cannabis was a route to 'getting you known' and its value seemed to lie in what this signified to the person themselves. In this way, cannabis could also perform a self-affirming function over and above its role in presenting particular types of image to others.

### ***Cannabis and street-based leisure cultures***

For some 'cannabis oriented' participants, cannabis seems to perform a symbolic function which is closely linked to the notion of 'uncertain identities' (Giddens, 1991, Beck, 1992). This idea relates to the observation that under conditions of late modernity, agency may be more important than structure, particularly in the context of young people's risk behaviours. Many young cannabis users appear to derive certain benefits from this special relationship, but this operates in different ways for different young people. Factors relating to peer group structure, degree of experience with cannabis, and local cultural norms, seem to influence how this symbolic relationship works. However, just as it would be misleading to assume that all young people experience this in similar ways, it would also be a mistake to assume that all young people in the late modern era experience their lives in similar ways, or that young people's choices are mediated and negotiated solely through social relationships. Structural factors also clearly have an impact on young people's risk taking behaviour since it is these factors which bound subjective experience. In the context of this study, most of the participants for whom cannabis appeared to have a particular salience, spent much of their leisure time hanging out with friends on street corners, although they also had links with local youth organisations. Their accounts of street life, and the role that cannabis appears to play in this, suggest that their cannabis use and its association with risk can also be understood as a means of avoiding the boring and mundane, and as a way of creating their own excitement (Pavis & Cunningham-Burley, 1999). From this perspective, their culture of storytelling, for example, can be seen as serving a function beyond presenting particular types of social image to others - it can also be understood as an attempt to manage constraints imposed upon them by their life circumstances.

### ***Different experiences with cannabis - occasional use and non-use***

So far, this discussion has focused on the experiences of those participants for whom cannabis appears to have a special significance, mainly boys engaged in street-based leisure cultures. But not all cannabis users experienced cannabis in the same way. While appearing to hold similar liberal beliefs and attitudes as those held by the 'cannabis oriented' participants, for some 'opportunistic' cannabis users, cannabis was

not an important part of their social lives, and it only appeared to occupy a very marginal role. These participants, both male and female, appeared to use cannabis only under very specific circumstances. For some older participants, this meant chilling out with friends at a party, for others, it meant occasionally accepting a few draws from a joint that was being passed around by peers. Of particular significance, many of these participants actively resisted embracing a cannabis user identity. Although it was clear from their accounts that they used cannabis under certain circumstances, this did not necessarily make them a 'cannabis user'. For the most part, these participants drew the line at actually buying cannabis and this appeared to represent a key defining feature for them. As long as they did not play an active role in seeking out and buying cannabis for themselves, these participants were able to distance themselves from a cannabis user identity. Perhaps this was a way of signalling their difference from other cannabis users, a way of avoiding a community of identity with others who may use cannabis in a different way to themselves. This distinction may also reflect a belief that using cannabis is something you do, rather than something you are. It also seems significant that the 'opportunistic' users appeared to be much less tolerant of the negative effects of cannabis on the behaviour of their peers. So 'gouching out' or being sick, far from being an entertaining sideshow, were regarded as annoying and unacceptable by these occasional users.

In constructing their cannabis use in a way that enabled them to distance themselves from other types of cannabis use, these occasional users could be implying that some ways of using cannabis are acceptable, while others are not. They appeared to regard their own relationship with cannabis as routine and mundane, as simply one small, occasional aspect of their behaviour, but in no way a defining feature of how they spend their time, or who they are. For these participants, other things appeared far more important in defining who they were. Some enjoyed more privileged lifestyles and had greater access to material resources, others seemed to manage limitations imposed on them by their living circumstances through an interest in sport or an engagement with local youth development projects. For others, particularly girls, alcohol was more significant than cannabis.

These occasional users seemed to occupy an intermediate position between the largely street-based 'cannabis-oriented' participants on the one hand, and those young people who reported avoiding cannabis altogether, on the other. Many appeared to straddle aspects of both social worlds - engaging to some extent with street-based



leisure, but also engaging in organised, activity-based pursuits. As noted earlier, in most cases, non-cannabis users seemed to avoid any contact at all with street-based leisure. In this way, they avoided contact with cannabis. Those few non-users who did appear to spend time hanging out on the street, seemed to adopt a deliberate strategy of avoiding certain groups of young people as a way of shielding themselves from the possibility of getting drawn into cannabis by their peers.

It should be noted, however, that this interpretation relies on evidence from a relatively small number of interviews. The gender mix of the sample has also contributed to an exaggerated picture of the apparent association between cannabis and street life, implying that this is mainly restricted to boys. This is because most of the young people who took part in this study, and who spent much of their leisure time on the streets, were male. A few girls did engage in these street-based leisure cultures, but apart from one fifteen year old young woman who appeared to take part very much on her own terms, the other female participants seemed to use cannabis as a way of gaining access to predominantly male peer groups. These participants were younger, however, and it may be that age, rather than gender, was a key factor in shaping their relationship with cannabis in this context. The relatively small numbers involved in the study clearly limit the potential for teasing out how young people of different genders and at different stages in their lives manage these social interactions in street-based settings. The cross-sectional design also makes it impossible to chart possible 'cannabis careers'. Nonetheless, on the basis of these data, it does appear that cannabis plays a special role in street life and that this is predominantly a male phenomenon.

A number of issues seem to arise from these findings, relating to the associations between cannabis, gender, social identity, and street-based leisure cultures. In terms of gender variations, the most recent Scottish survey data reports that thirteen and fifteen year old boys are more likely than girls of the same age to have used drugs (mostly cannabis) in the month prior to the survey, although this difference decreases with age (ISD Scotland, 2002). Taking this finding together with the finding of the present study, which highlights apparent gender differences in the meanings and use of cannabis in young people's lives, it seems reasonable to suggest that initiatives aimed at addressing young people's cannabis use should be gender-sensitive, taking into account the different experiences of boys and girls. If cannabis is associated with particular types of desirable social identity, it also seems reasonable to assume that young people who value and aspire to these identities will continue to be

attracted by cannabis. New ways of providing access to these kinds of identity therefore need to be developed if we are effectively to address young people's continuing relationship with cannabis.

The other side of this coin is that it is equally important to find ways of conveying non-cannabis use as 'cool' and desirable. The contribution that media campaigns can make to this will be discussed in greater detail in the next part of this final chapter. Recognising young people's agency, and understanding more fully the role of subtle forms of peer influence on young people's cannabis use, also seem to be promising approaches for health promotion. An ongoing study with pre-teens has highlighted the importance of equipping young people with arguments which will help them to more effectively resist the offer of cannabis (McIntosh et al, 2002c). Given the tendency for participants in the present study, cannabis users and non-users alike, to view recreational cannabis use as largely benign, an important new goal for drugs education may be to equip young people with credible, alternative arguments which will enable them to manage such offers without losing face. Finally, the association of cannabis with street-based leisure cultures suggests that it is not only risk behaviours themselves that health promotion needs to tackle, but also the broader circumstances of young people's lives. Recent government policy supports this twin approach (SODH, 1999) but it would appear that greater efforts are required if we are to translate this rhetoric into reality.

### **Local neighbourhood context**

In order to more fully understand the role of cannabis in young people's lives, it is important to have a feel for the contexts within which this behaviour takes place. As well as living their lives in families and in the company of peers, young people's lives are also partly played out within the context of a local neighbourhood. For example, as we have seen in the previous section, young people's cannabis use seems to be particularly associated with aspects of street-based leisure cultures. In order to generate these kinds of data, young people in this study were asked about how they felt about where they lived and how they spent their time. In addition to serving the important function of helping participants to settle down and feel more comfortable in the interview setting, these data allowed an analysis to be conducted about how aspects of locality may have helped to shape young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. Taking advantage of the structure of the sample, this analysis focused on a comparison between accounts generated by participants living in two contrasting areas - a small semi-rural market town offering few youth facilities, and a

large urban estate comprising several continuous neighbourhoods, each offering a range of facilities specifically aimed at young people. On the basis of this comparison, these data suggest that factors relating to locality may play a role in how young people experience life in a particular community. This, in turn, may affect how they spend their leisure time, although these differences do not necessarily translate into different patterns of health behaviours amongst the young people who live there. Other mediating factors, such as attitudes and preferences about leisure and how this relates to self-image, access to material resources, and engagement with aspects of community life, may intervene to help shape young people's health related beliefs and behaviour.

### ***Living in a semi-rural community***

In one community, a dearth of facilities for young people seemed to contribute to some young people taking to the streets, leading to a local culture in which young people felt unwelcome and unfairly criticised for what they perceived as simply hanging out with friends. The only social event specifically for young people, the monthly youth club disco, seemed to be a focus for excessive behaviour, in particular heavy drinking. The high cost of local transport also seemed to be a prohibitive factor, preventing some participants from spending their leisure time further afield, although some participants, particularly girls, seemed relatively content to spend much of their leisure time at home with friends and family. An important qualification relating to these findings, however, is that all of these participants were recruited from the only youth club in the town so it is likely that to some extent they shared a particular perspective on life in this community. Had the study recruited young people who did not have a stake in being involved in organised leisure, it seems likely that very different types of data would have been generated.

### ***Living in a territorial community***

Participants living in the other community faced a different set of challenges. Rival gang fights, fuelled by a territorial atmosphere, seemed to be a regular feature in this area. As with the other area, however, young people experienced and engaged with this in a range of ways. For those not directly involved, these skirmishes occasionally constrained their access to leisure facilities and although local youth workers continue to be actively engaged in trying to break down territorial barriers, many young people tended not to stray beyond their immediate neighbourhood. Some young people, though, appeared to gain social benefits through their active involvement in street life, including affiliation to their local gang. Engaging in a



range of potentially health damaging behaviours, including using cannabis, seemed to be an accepted and integral part of this experience. There were some indications that some older boys, with the support of youth workers, were beginning to channel their energies into more positive pursuits, but many of the younger participants seemed stuck in this unhealthy territorial dynamic. It is important to note, though, that most of the participants from this community were boys, so it is likely that these findings reflect a particularly male perspective. Nonetheless, these accounts do seem to suggest that young people are likely to experience life differently depending on where they live, and that this may have some impact on their relationship with cannabis and other substances. Within communities, young people are also likely to respond differently to these local factors depending on their broader life circumstances.

These findings seem to have a number of implications. Firstly, they highlight the importance for health promotion of taking account of local circumstances. They also highlight the crucial health promotion role of youth workers in helping young people to make positive choices about their lives and how they spend their leisure time. For some young people, notably those living in rural and semi-rural areas, reducing the cost of transport and providing more facilities may improve access to more constructive options. Many young people, however, value adult-free, unsupervised time and space and for these young people, providing more facilities is unlikely to be the answer. As noted earlier, for these young people in particular, it is short-sighted to focus on risk behaviours without also addressing broader life circumstances. How young people are perceived by members of their local community and the impact this may have on how they achieve a sense of self worth also seems to be an important issue. So long as young people are constructed as 'the problem' rather than acknowledging their role as a resource for the future, it seems likely that for some young people at least, this will continue to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **Cultural context**

During the fieldwork phase of this study, a public debate about drugs policy in general, and cannabis regulation in particular resurfaced in the media and in policy circles. Of particular significance in Scotland, The Big Issue magazine carried out a poll of Scotland's MSPs, leading to a disclosure of youthful cannabis use by some ministers and kick-starting a national debate on cannabis aimed at reforming Scotland's drug laws (The Big Issue, 1999). Around the same time, a number of prominent musicians popular with young people were linked with cannabis in the



media, and cannabis featured in the story-line of several TV dramas. These circumstances acted to form a cultural backdrop to this research, and clearly contributed to the generation of particular types of data. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also meant that although exploring young people's perspectives on this debate was not an explicit goal, participants themselves on many occasions chose to introduce the topic. It became clear at an early stage that this was an issue of some salience to many young people, and hence it became established as a theme worth exploring in some detail.

### ***Young people's perspectives on the cannabis debate***

The key finding from this chapter was that most young people, cannabis users and non-users alike, appear to favour a relaxation in the cannabis laws, although within some form of regulatory framework. With only a few exceptions, young people in this study expressed the view that the potential for recreational cannabis use to criminalise young people was unfair, out of proportion with its harmfulness and inconsistent with attitudes to young people's use of tobacco and alcohol. This is not to say, however, that all of these young people uncritically supported cannabis deregulation. A few felt that this may be problematic, for example, it may result in more young people trying cannabis. For the most part, however, most supported some form of reform, albeit within certain limits. Only a few younger participants, none of whom had tried cannabis themselves, seemed to regard cannabis as a dangerous drug which young people should steer clear of at all costs. These same young people also appeared to hold exaggerated views about the potential health damaging effects of cannabis. These views were apparently informed by a drugs education session at school and it seems likely that this view may be the result of confusion about the effects of a range of different drugs.

### ***Young people, cannabis and the media***

This chapter also shed some light on how young people view the potential impact of role models and television advertising on aspects of their lives, although it is important to bear in mind that this analysis is based on relatively few accounts and can only be considered provisional and tentative. For the most part, young people themselves introduced discussion of these issues, and this perhaps reflects the continuing significance of popular media in reaching and potentially influencing a young audience. As noted earlier, it would appear that the media is becoming adept at linking certain risk behaviours with particular types of image and with successful lifestyles, whether through media coverage of pop stars' cannabis use, or through

marketing certain products, notably alcohol, to the youth market. It would appear that how young people relate to these influences depends on a wide range of factors, not least their own personal experience with cannabis and other substances, and their level of identification with aspects of youth culture.

These findings seem to be relevant in the context of two particular developments - the recent decision to reclassify cannabis, and the increasing use of both commercial and public health advertising to exploit knowledge of youth culture to 'sell' their products. As noted earlier, a decision has now been taken to downgrade cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug, a change which is due to be implemented sometime in 2003. We know little, however, about how young people may interpret, and perhaps act on this change, nor how it will be implemented, and it seems timely to further draw upon young people's perspectives in order to find out precisely how this change may impact on young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour. On the basis of such limited data, it would be inappropriate to make any claims about what these accounts may tell us about the role of advertising in influencing aspects of young people's lives. However, two points are worth noting. Firstly, the popularity of certain adverts may suggest that the drinks industry in particular is adept at successfully exploiting its knowledge of aspects of youth culture in order to open up new markets for its products. Of course, simply appealing to a youth audience does not mean that such adverts will necessarily lead to more young people consuming alcohol, but this kind of portrayal may add to the culture of acceptability which already seems to exist around young people's drinking. This is a potential trend that advertising regulatory bodies need to take account of. So far as public health advertising is concerned, one other point seems important. As noted earlier, there is a need to exploit the power of the media to promote 'cool' images which young people will find attractive and which are associated with healthier lifestyles. But those adverts which seek to deter young people from engaging in particular behaviours also need to ensure that their impact is not compromised by images and messages which appear to contradict aspects of young people's own personal experience. It is crucial for health education in all its forms to be accurate and grounded in young people's own experience.

### **Comparing cannabis with cigarettes**

Reflecting the aim of trying to understand more about how young people view the relationship between cannabis and cigarettes, and, in particular, how young people's cannabis use may support and sustain their cigarette smoking, this study also generated data on young people's perspectives on these issues. As noted earlier, this part of the study aimed to build on the findings of a number of other recent studies which have suggested that cannabis may introduce some young people to cigarette smoking (Albutt et al, 1995, Bell et al, 1998). Generating these kinds of data proved problematic and led to the introduction of a stimulus activity aimed at trying to access participants' understandings of aspects of this relationship. This activity took the form of an 'agree-disagree' card game, and in this way, concepts were introduced according to statements written on each card, and not by participants themselves. In some cases, though, the cards were also a way of probing ideas that had been touched upon earlier in some of the interviews, for example, in relation to 'addiction'. So, introducing a card that read, "You can't get addicted to cannabis", was an attempt to more fully understand how young people relate the concept of addiction to cannabis. The study's emphasis on cannabis also made it difficult to compare how participants talked about cannabis on the one hand, and cigarettes, on the other. The analysis therefore relies in some cases on comparing different types of data, and although limited by these factors, it was nonetheless possible to shed light on a number of issues.

A key finding was that cannabis users appear to view 'addiction' as a concept which is relevant to both behaviours, although more so for cigarettes than for cannabis. They tended to use this concept in an ambiguous and apparently contradictory way, however, and this perhaps highlights the tension between the physical effects of addiction, on the one hand, and the social role of these two behaviours in young people's lives, on the other. Non-cannabis users tended to vary in their attitudes to 'addiction' in relation to both behaviours, although in contrast with the cannabis users, some clearly viewed cannabis as highly addictive. Participants also compared both behaviours in terms of relative 'harm', with many cannabis users appearing to view cannabis as less harmful than cigarettes. As discussed earlier, in many cases, this view seemed to derive from the myth that cannabis can undo some of the damage caused by cigarette smoking, a belief often passed on by older siblings. Of particular significance, this chapter concluded that young people's cannabis use may in a number of respects support and sustain their cigarette smoking behaviour, occasionally introducing some young people to tobacco and subsequently to cigarette smoking.

Given the continuing tendency for many young people to experiment with both cannabis and cigarettes, these findings are of some relevance in the context of smoking cessation, particularly since we know that in the case of smoking, many young people now say they want to stop (Denscombe, 2001). In Scotland, it has been reported that over half the calls to Smokeline, a helpline service targeted mainly at adults, came from young people under the age of sixteen (HDA, 2000). In terms of tobacco consumption, we know that most addicted smokers take up the habit during adolescence and that nicotine is a highly addictive substance, some claim more difficult to give up than heroin or cocaine (Royal College of Physicians, 2000). In recent months, two leading cancer charities, the Cancer Research Campaign and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, have funded a pilot scheme in a disadvantaged area in Nottingham in which smokers as young as twelve are being given nicotine replacement therapy to help them quit. This move seems to reflect a belief that physical dependence is at the heart of young people's failed attempts to quit smoking.

A few other recent studies have attempted to shed light on young people's views about nicotine addiction, recognising the importance of including young people's perspectives in this debate. In one study, young people talked about smoking as both an addiction and a habit. As a habit, it served a social function, something to do with your friends but something you could stop. In contrast, as an addiction, it was something that could not be stopped (Albutt et al, 1995). A study exploring smoking among teenage girls found that many older teenagers feel that they are addicted because they have tried to stop smoking and have been unsuccessful in their attempts to give it up (Moffat & Johnson 2001). Many highlighted the tension between not wanting to smoke anymore, yet still enjoying aspects of it, and 'readiness to stop' seemed to be a necessary pre-condition for launching a successful cessation attempt. In another study, addiction appeared to be at the core of young people's understanding of adult smoking, while young people's smoking, on the other hand, was seen as profoundly social, something that they do with their friends (Rugkasa et al, 2001). From this perspective, addiction seemed much less relevant. In addition, while associating addiction in adults with loss of control, this study also found that young people's smoking may be a way for them to 'gain control' and achieve status amongst their peers. The findings from this cannabis study seem to build on these insights and add to the evidence base which highlights the need to go beyond oversimplistic interpretations of the role of addiction in young people's smoking. In particular, attention must be paid to the social role of smoking in young people's



lives, and the difficulties of trying to quit whilst other peers continue to smoke. Given the inter-relatedness of cannabis and cigarettes, and the apparent potential for cannabis to introduce some young people to smoking, it is important not to lose sight of the possible knock-on effects of relatively 'benign' cannabis experimentation. It seems likely that only a small proportion of young people will go on to become regular lifetime cannabis users, unable to 'kick' the habit. However, there may be a risk that those who become introduced to tobacco through youthful experimentation with cannabis may find it more difficult to quit smoking, although some young cannabis users themselves perceive there to be little risk of addiction to tobacco through cannabis (Fast Forward Positive Lifestyles, 2002).

### **Implications for health promotion research, policy and practice**

This study adds to the growing literature on young people's risk behaviours, in particular, shedding new light on young people's cannabis use and the meanings they attach to this behaviour. The broad theoretical approach adopted in this study - exploring risk behaviours in context - highlights the potential for this type of research to inform health promotion. By exploring young people's accounts of the broader contexts within which they live out their lives, it is possible to understand more fully young people's cannabis use. Aspects of the study's methodology, in particular the use of paired interviewing, also contributed to this goal, facilitating the emergence of these kinds of data. Although interview settings cannot be considered to be 'natural settings', to a certain extent this method was able to mimic one of the important contexts in young people's lives, and hence was effective in shedding light on aspects of young people's social relationships with one another, which, in turn, provided insights into young people's cannabis use. However, while paired interviewing seemed to be particularly effective in generating the types of data required by this study, it is important to carefully match the choice of interview method with the types of data required. It seems likely that this method may be less effective in revealing insights into the broader contexts of young people's risk taking. For example, paired interviews may not work well when the goal is to access accounts about how being excluded from peer groups, or occupying a low position in a peer group hierarchy affects young people's risk taking behaviour. In the context of this study, however, this method proved to be very effective, not least because it was also the popular choice of young people themselves.

The study suggests some promising new directions for research on young people's risk behaviours. The forthcoming implementation of the recent decision to reclassify

cannabis provides a very timely opportunity to explore how this change may impact on how people understand cannabis and its risks, and how this may affect behaviour. In view of this study's findings about the ambiguous way knowledge of young people's cannabis use is managed in the family context, it would be particularly interesting to explore this issue from the perspectives of both young people and parents. This study also provides further evidence of the potential for cannabis to support and sustain young people's cigarette smoking, but we know little about the processes that contribute to this. Reducing smoking is one of key targets of the British Government's tobacco control strategy, and specific cessation services are being set up for young people (HEBS, 2002). Research which more fully explores this relationship would benefit smoking cessation efforts, as would research which aims to understand young people's concepts and experiences of addiction.

From a methodological perspective, it may also be useful to conduct a systematic comparison of different types of qualitative interviewing in order to inform decisions about which methods are most appropriate for particular types of research. It may also be useful to conduct further research with specific groups of young people. For example, whilst also including the perspectives of young people who do not use cannabis, this study has given more emphasis to the accounts of those young people who report being cannabis users. It seems likely that listening carefully to non-users may add additional important insights into cannabis avoidance. Similarly, given the apparent association between street-based leisure and cannabis use, it may also be useful to conduct further research with young people, both boys and girls, who spend the majority of their leisure time in this way, as well as those who choose not to.

The study also touched upon a number of policy areas, all of which can be seen in the context of the principles enshrined in the Ottawa Charter on health promotion (WHO, 1986). For example, the association between young people's cannabis use and street-based leisure cultures adds support to an earlier study which calls for a greater commitment to the current policy goal of addressing life circumstances as well as risk behaviours (Pavis & Cunningham-Burley, 1999). This is best achieved through a multi-disciplinary, partnership approach which includes not only health professionals but also youth workers, families and others who have a role and stake in young people's lives. It is also important, of course, for young people themselves to be involved as equal partners in health promotion efforts. In this way, perhaps young people will begin to be perceived not as the problem, but instead, as part of the solution.

Findings from this study also add to the evidence base informing two particular aspects of health promotion's efforts to address young people's risk behaviours - drugs education and smoking cessation. In terms of drugs education, the study adds support for the growing shift away from 'one size fits all' approaches which often rely on scare tactics, and fail to take account of young people's own agency. Instead, it is important for these programmes to be clear, realistic and rooted in young people's experiences, recognising the role of peers, but also older family members, in helping to shape young people's views and behaviour. Other recent studies have identified a range of factors which appear to increase the likelihood of success of drugs education in schools. These factors include the intensity of the programme (White & Pitts, 1998), the use of interactive teaching methods (Tobler & Stratton, 1997, Fitzgerald et al, 2002) and the involvement of parents or the wider community in the process (Donaldson et al, 1996, Lloyd et al, 2000). These kinds of approach include activities which not only provide accurate information and raise awareness, but also provide young people with the opportunities to learn and practice their skills in managing a whole range of situations which may lead to drug use. An ongoing study of pre-teen drug use also aims to inform drugs education programmes, shedding light on a range of aspects, including the avoidance by young people of drugs misuse, the factors associated with pre-teen exposure to drugs, the role of choice, pressure and influence on pre-teen drug use and dealing with offers of drugs (McIntosh, 2002, McIntosh et al, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). Given the apparent association between cannabis use and particular types of social identity, it also seems important for localised drugs education to be supported at a national level by media campaigns such as those by HEBS and the Scottish Executive, which seek to use an understanding of aspects of youth culture to promote desirable images that can be achieved through lifestyles which do not include drug taking.

Since in many instances, young people's cannabis use and cigarette smoking behaviour appear to be intertwined, this study also suggests some promising directions for smoking cessation practice. In line with a recent review on youth tobacco control, this study has highlighted the significance of teen smoking cessation programmes as a promising approach to supporting young people's efforts to quit, alongside a range of other interventions and policy developments (Lantz et al, 2000, HEBS, 2002). Up until now, smoking cessation projects may not generally have taken account of the potential for cannabis to introduce some young people to tobacco, nor its role in supporting smoking behaviour in some young people. Indeed,

most health promotion programmes treat smoking and drugs separately. Recognising how these processes operate, and acknowledging their role as a potential barrier to quitting is likely to enhance the effectiveness of programmes which offer support to young smokers who want to quit. Similarly, while ongoing pilot programmes aimed at assessing the effectiveness of nicotine replacement therapy with young people are a useful development, it is unhelpful if these programmes take too narrow an approach to addiction and dependence. It is important to recognise the social role of smoking in young people's lives, and to base programmes on clear evidence about how young people understand and experience these concepts. Given the significance of peer influence on young people's cessation efforts, it may be appropriate to develop programmes which can offer support at a group level as well as at an individual level. Many young smokers now say they want to quit, and it is incumbent upon those engaged in health promotion in general, and smoking cessation in particular, to provide the kind of support which will help young people to achieve this goal. This requires a better understanding of the nature and extent of the relationship between cigarettes and cannabis, and a need to assess the effectiveness of new cessation approaches with young people themselves. It also requires a more collaborative approach to research which involves researchers and practitioners from both the tobacco and drugs fields working together (Amos et al, submitted).

## **Conclusion**

Drawing upon sociological perspectives which explore the broader contexts of young people's lives in order to more fully understand risk behaviours, is a useful approach. Tapping into the richness and diversity of young people's experiences by accessing their perspectives can reveal many of the meanings and motivations underpinning their everyday health relevant behaviours. In the context of this study, this approach has shown how young people's cannabis related beliefs and behaviour are rooted in a complex interaction of factors which span both the wider socio-economic structures in which they live out their lives, and more localised social norms and relationships. Given the complex set of challenges facing young people today, health promotion can usefully benefit from more studies of this kind in order to inform policy and practice aimed at improving health, and empowering young people to have more control over their health.

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**APPENDIX 1****Sample Characteristics**

(Adapted from Health Behaviours of Scottish Schoolchildren Questionnaire)

**Number of Holidays in Previous Year:**

More than twice	12
Twice	22
Once	16
Not at all	9

**Car Ownership:**

Two or more	16
One	32
None	11

**Own Bedroom:**

Yes	41
No	18

**Self-Reported Weekly Income:**

Less than £5	4
£5-£10	21
£10-£21	17
£20-£30	11
More than £30	3
Don't know/Depends	3

**Self-Reported Level of Affluence:**

Very well off	10
Quite well off	26
Average	20
Not very well off	3
Not at all well off	0

**Family Structure:**

One parent	8
Two married parents	37
Parent plus partner	5
Parent plus step-parent	5
Grandmother	1
Only child	9
No answer	3

## APPENDIX 2 Interview Settings

Interview Setting	Code	No. of inter views	Male	Female
Large, relatively deprived inner city estate comprising several continuous neighbourhoods in the east of Scotland. Participants were recruited from three different youth clubs, two in one neighbourhood, one in another. Interviews took place in the corresponding club premises	N	10	7	3
Small, relatively affluent semi-rural market town near Edinburgh. Participants were recruited from the town's only youth club and interviews were conducted on the club premises	B	7	3	4
Small, relatively deprived coastal town near Edinburgh. Participants were recruited from one of the town's two community facilities and interviews took place in this youth club	R	5 *	2	2
Small, relatively affluent coastal town near Edinburgh. Participants were recruited through a detached youth work project. Interviews took place in the local community centre - not normally used by these young people	D	4	2	2
Large, relatively deprived, peripheral housing estate in Glasgow. Participants were recruited at the pilot stage through a personal contact from a young people's health project, one of the many local facilities in the area. Interviews took place on the project's premises	T	2	0	2
Relatively affluent neighbourhood in central Edinburgh. Participants were recruited at the pilot stage through personal contacts. Two interviews were conducted in participants' homes	M	2	1	1

\* The interviews conducted in this setting included one mixed sex pair

## **APPENDIX 3      Topic Guide**

### **Perception of Local Area**

What's it like living in X?

### **Leisure Time**

Tell me about the last time you had a really great time

What about the last time you had a really crap time?

What would you say are the most important things in your life?

What kind of things do you do when you get together with your friends?

### **Smoking**

Do you mind me asking if you've ever tried smoking?

Can you remember when you first tried cigarettes?

Why do you think a lot of young people try smoking?

What made you decide to try smoking? Have you ever tried to stop?

### **Drinking**

What about drinking? Can you tell me a bit about that?

### **Cannabis**

Do you mind me asking if you've tried cannabis?

Can you remember the first time you tried it?

Is it something you still do? How do you get hold of it?

Can you tell me a bit about when you use cannabis?

How often would you say you use it?

Why do you think lots of young people try cannabis?

Is it something both boys and girls do?

Why would you say you use cannabis?

### **Links between cannabis use and cigarette smoking**

Is smoking cannabis different from smoking cigarettes?

Some folk say that if you use cannabis this might lead you on to starting to smoke cigarettes. What do you think?

Have you come across this at all with any of your friends or anyone you know?

### **Perceptions of adult views**

What do you reckon adults think about young people using cannabis?

How do you think your parents would react if they knew about you using cannabis?

### **Final Question**

Just to finish off, is there anything else, maybe something you didn't get a chance to say earlier, that you'd like to add?





## RESEARCH PROJECT:

### Young people talking about their lives

#### **What's the research about?**

Nowadays, young people and issues affecting young people's lives are often talked about - mostly by adults. We often see headlines describing "13 year olds addicts" or "drunken teenagers terrorising the neighbourhood"

#### **BUT**

Nobody asks young people what they think - we don't know what young people's lives are like, what really matters to them and what their views and opinions are, for example, about smoking, drinking and cannabis

#### **Why bother with this research?**

- talking to young people will ensure that their voices are heard
- these views and opinions will help provide programmes and facilities that young people want

#### **So what do you think?**

**What would you like to say to your teachers,  
or your parents, or the government?**



## How can I take part?

You can take part in one of two ways - you can choose to do a 1-1 interview (just you and the researcher) **OR** you and one of your friends can meet with the researcher - it's up to you



## What happens next?

If you want to take part, the researcher will discuss with you a suitable time to have the interview. The interview will take place at a local community centre or another place that's convenient for you. It will last for 30-45 minutes and the researcher will ask questions about:

- what things are important to you
- how you and your friends spend your time
- what your views and opinions are about activities like smoking, drinking and using cannabis

At the end of the interview, the researcher will also ask you to fill in a brief questionnaire about yourself

## Will anyone else find out what I've said?

- **NO** - the research is **STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL**
- No names will be used in the research report

## Who is the researcher?

- She's a community worker called Gill Highet
- You can contact her by phone on 0131-650-3232 or by e-mail at [Gill.Highet@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Gill.Highet@ed.ac.uk)

**THANKS FOR YOUR HELP!**



## **Young People and Cannabis Research Project**

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **What was the project about?**

Research has found that, nowadays, many young people experiment with cannabis but we know very little about why this is or about the role that cannabis plays in young people's lives. This project set out to talk to young people themselves in order to find out their views and opinions on this. Since many young people also smoke cigarettes, the project also aimed to find out more about how cannabis and cigarettes smoking are related.

#### **Who took part in the study?**

In total, 59 young people took part. Most of the participants live in Edinburgh and East Lothian and they were recruited and interviewed in youth clubs rather than in school. This is because it is often easier for young people to talk freely and feel comfortable in a more informal setting. The participants were given a choice of how they would like to be interviewed and most chose to be interviewed with a friend of their choice. 30 interviews were conducted - 21 paired interviews, 5 individual interviews, and 4 threesomes.

#### **What did the interviews involve?**

Although the project aimed to find out about young people's experiences with cannabis and what they think about cannabis, the participants were also asked to talk about different aspects of their lives, including where they live and how they spend their leisure time. This is important because knowing more about young people's lives helps us to more fully understand why some young people experiment with cannabis, and others don't. With the participants' permission, all of the interviews were tape recorded so that the researcher had a record of what was said. All the information shared in the interviews has been analysed, but none of the participants can be identified in any of the reports written about the study.

## **What did the study find?**

The researcher studied the information from all of the interviews and the main findings are reported below:

### **Family**

- ❖ Some participants think their parents would 'kill them' for using cannabis - but only if they actually get caught
- ❖ Older siblings sometimes encourage their younger brothers and sisters to try cannabis - they may give them their first joint or lend them money to buy cannabis. Young people also learn about cannabis from their older brothers and sisters or those of their friends

### **Peers**

- ❖ Boys in particular seem to get some positive things from their cannabis use - for example, it gives them something to do, helps them to feel part of the crowd and sometimes makes them feel good about themselves. This is especially true for boys who spend a lot of their leisure time hanging out on the streets

### **Local Neighbourhood**

- ❖ Where young people live can affect their relationship with cannabis - for example, 'territorial' areas where gangs of young people sometimes fight with one another also tend to have lots of young people who use cannabis

### **Cannabis and the Law**

- ❖ Most young people think that the laws relating to cannabis are too strict and should be relaxed - but there should still be some rules

### **Cannabis and Cigarettes**

- ❖ Many young people who use cannabis also smoke cigarettes. Nowadays, some young people start with cannabis and then go on to smoke cigarettes. Using cannabis can also help to keep young people smoking cigarettes - for example, they may use cigarettes as a substitute if cannabis is not available

**Gill Highet**  
**March 2003**



## Cannabis and smoking research: interviewing young people in self-selected friendship pairs

G. Highet

### Abstract

This paper will discuss the use of paired interviewing as the main method of generating data in a study exploring the social context of young people's smoking and cannabis use. The research, conducted as part of an on-going PhD, involved 59 participants of both genders, aged 13-15 from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and with a wide range of cigarette and cannabis use experience. Participants were offered the choice of an individual interview or a paired interview with a friend of their choice, most opting for the paired format. The paper will discuss many of the methodological and ethical features of this method. In particular, it will discuss the potential for paired interviewing to access accounts generated within close friendship bonds, making this method distinctive from larger focus groups. It will also explore how paired interviewing facilitates access to interactions between participants, shedding light on many aspects of young people's social relationships and allowing occasional glimpses into more private territory. It will argue that the paired interview method can make a novel and distinctive contribution to health education/promotion research, policy and practice, and to any research that aims more fully to understand aspects of young people's social worlds.

### Introduction

#### Research with young people

Much research has been carried out on, rather than with, children and young people (Oakley, 1994) and is based on the assumption that children compared to adults are often developmentally incomplete (Mayall, 2000). Emerging sociological perspectives, on the other hand, view children and young people as social actors in their own right (Mayall, 1996, 1999). According to this view, the research enterprise is primarily concerned with reaching a greater understanding of young people's perspectives on their social lives. This distinction is crucial since how the researcher 'sees' young people is fundamental to the development of a coherent methodological framework (Morrow and Richards, 1996). From this standpoint, young people have a right to have their voices heard and their opinions sought in matters affecting their lives. Teenage smoking and drug cultures in particular have remained stubbornly impervious to simplistic, adult-centred health education messages that ignore young people's perspectives (Shucksmith and Hendry, 1998). Approaches which seek to more fully understand teenage substance use by drawing on young people's expertise are both methodologically and ethically robust (Mauthner, 1997; Mayall, 2000). Treating young people as 'experts' on their own lives can help to balance the power dynamics in the research relationship, creating a safer, more relaxed atmosphere and encouraging the generation of richer, more insightful data which more accurately represent aspects of young people's lives. This paper

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will seek to show that paired interviewing conducted within the framework of a coherent methodological strategy can critically engage young people and elicit thoughtful, reflective accounts, shedding new light on many aspects of young people's social lives. Such an approach is consistent with emerging perspectives in health promotion which locate young people's smoking and cannabis use within their social and cultural worlds, and offer alternative approaches to addressing some of the challenges facing young people today.

### **Interviewing children and young people**

Shedding light on young people's perceptions and understandings presents many challenges; in particular, fostering and maintaining participants' interest and motivation and generating data that is firmly grounded in young people's social realities (Gray *et al.*, 1997). Qualitative interviewing is generally regarded as an appropriate method for generating data with young people (Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Morrow and Richards, 1996). The assumption is that young people can and do create meaningful worlds, and are able and willing to communicate their perceptions to an adult in the context of an interview (Miller and Glassner, 1997). Most commonly, this involves two distinctive approaches—individual interviews or focus groups, or a combination of the two. Some methodological critiques have demonstrated that different qualitative methods generate different responses from the same participants (Backett and Alexander, 1991; Michell and West, 1996). Paired interviewing represents both a relatively novel approach to interviewing young people and provides an opportunity to shed further light on this finding. To date, paired interviewing has been used mostly with very young children. A recent study aimed at exploring younger children's knowledge invited children aged 5 and 6 to talk with the researcher in pairs. Choosing a friend to take part with them in order to offset the inhibiting potential of the setting created a supportive social context which enabled the participants to engage

fully in conversation. In this same study, paired interviews also facilitated an exploration of family settings, with a child and a parent taking part in the interview. In this way, these 'research conversations' offered insights into what children know and to some extent, how they learn (Mayall, 2000). In another study on healthy eating with primary school children aged 5–9, the paired interview format provided a forum in which the young participants felt comfortable enough to quibble with each other, call each other names and argue over 'who knows best'. Mixed sex pairs were used, allowing for an exploration of gendered power relationships between children (Mauthner, 1997). A study investigating peer pressure to smoke invited young people aged 12–14 recruited from a secondary school to form their own small interview groups. Most opted for groups of three, although some participants chose a paired format (Michell, 1997). These small groupings differed from most focus groups both because of their size and because they consisted of self-selected friends which provided a natural social network. Other studies have acknowledged the diverse preferences of 10–14 year olds by offering participants a choice of group discussion, paired or individual interview (Edwards and Alldred, 1999). Building on these school-based studies, the author's research aims to explore paired interviewing with young people in the more naturalistic setting of youth clubs.

### **Understanding the social context of young people's use of cannabis and cigarettes**

Most previous research on cannabis has been constructed around concepts of addiction, deviance or risk. More recent studies suggest that cannabis use has become 'normalized' to some degree among some groups of young people (Measham *et al.*, 1994), although others caution against concluding that increasing usage is inevitable (Wibberley, 1997). Some studies highlight the relationship between young people's cannabis use and friendship networks (Bell *et al.*, 1998) and with having 'time out' (Parker *et al.*, 1998).

Another study reports that cannabis use may act for some as a gateway activity into cigarette smoking (Albutt *et al.*, 1995). These studies offer some insights into young people's use of cannabis, but we still know relatively little about the contemporary social contexts within which cannabis is used. Building on this previous work, the author's study aims to shed further light on the meaning and use of cannabis and cigarettes in young people's lives and to explore the inter-relationship between these two behaviours.

### Reflections on methods

The research comprises 30 interviews with 13–15 year olds from a wide range of backgrounds and with different patterns of use and non-use of cannabis and cigarettes. The participants were recruited from six geographical locations, mostly in Edinburgh and East Lothian, providing an urban/semi-rural mix. An exploratory fieldwork phase which set out to involve groups of young people, in practice generated paired interview data as well as group data. Seeking to build on this unintended but fruitful start, the researcher then selected paired interviews as one option for the major fieldwork phase. This format soon became established as the main method for generating data as more and more participants chose to be interviewed with a friend. Borrowing from ethnographic traditions, interview data were supplemented with data generated by other methods including discussions with youth workers, informal conversations with young people and fieldwork notes based on observations within the various settings. This provided a broader contextual framework to aid understanding. Young people were recruited from youth clubs and community centres in order to provide a more naturalistic setting than school-based studies. This allowed the researcher to accord the participants a greater degree of autonomy and influence than is likely to prevail in other, more formal settings (Fast Forward Positive Lifestyles, 1994; Hyde *et al.*, 2000) and provided access to stories generated through the kinds of spontaneous interactions common in youth clubs (Green and Hart, 1999). She purposefully

presented herself as a former community worker, as well as a research student interested in finding out more about young people's lives. Highlighting her past experience in youth work and positioning young people themselves as 'experts' on their own lives helped to lend credibility to the research and encouraged uptake by participants. Meeting with young people prior to interview and giving them a choice about how they could take part also helped to create a better balance in the relationship between researcher and participants. One limitation of the informal setting was that in a few cases, participants became distracted by events going on elsewhere in the youth club. This was a minor problem, though, and it was more easily managed than in larger focus groups. Such occasions also provided additional contextual data about aspects of young people's social relationships with one other. Most interviews lasted around 40 min, a few somewhat longer. In most cases, the researcher gained access to young people through a youth worker, met with the young people and spent time in the research setting prior to the interviews. Consent to participate was sought from young people themselves on an ongoing basis and the researcher held early meetings to explain the research and distribute written information sheets. Participants were given the choice of pairing up with a friend or taking part in an individual interview. A loosely structured topic guide was used in conjunction with a card game introduced towards the end of some interviews in which participants were invited to 'agree' or 'disagree' with statements written on cards and then to explain their choice. This additional activity was introduced as a way of trying to elicit more detailed accounts from participants and was used mostly with young men who in general tended to be less forthcoming than the young women.

### Reflecting on young people's choice of interview method

Of the 30 interviews, 21 were paired interviews, five were individual interviews and four were threesomes. All but one of the paired interviews comprised same sex groupings. In most cases, the

alternative one-on-one and threesome formats arose out of circumstances prevailing on the night rather than being the first choice of participants, although there is one significant exception where three young men insisted on being interviewed together. Apart from this particular threesome, the formation of the small groups was more to do with expediency than choice and this may have contributed to a consistent dynamic in these interviews whereby two out of three participants tended to dominate the discussion. This self-selected threesome will be discussed later together with data from the paired interviews, exploring in particular the significance of the close friendship bond. Without exception, the one-on-one interviews were the result of young people consenting rather than actively choosing this method as part of a negotiated process about how to manage situations where participants were absent. These interviews generated individual data, mostly 'public' in nature, but by definition were unable to access interactions between participants. In this project at least, the paired interview format was clearly the popular choice among young people themselves.

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### **Paired interviews in practice**

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In this study, paired interviews offered many practical advantages. At the early stage of negotiating access, this format, together with a flexibility of approach which offered young people a choice, represented a good 'fit' with informal settings. Such an approach is consistent with youth work values and in most cases was rewarded with a cooperative and supportive response from adult gatekeepers. Recruitment was also relatively straightforward. Irrespective of age, gender and socioeconomic circumstances, the young people visibly relaxed and became more enthusiastic about participating when it became clear that they could choose to take part with a friend. Paired interviews were also relatively easy to set up and suffered a very low drop-out rate. Participants who were comfortable and familiar with one another, and who had some degree of control over the interview, also offered a more naturalistic context and facilit-

ated a better balance in the relationship between interviewer and participants. This facilitated the process of developing trust and rapport and helped to generate high quality data, although two interviews were less successful than the others. In one case, the researcher had not met the participants prior to the interview and hence had not begun to establish a relationship with them. In the other, a subsequent discussion with the youth worker confirmed that the participants' non-engagement with the interview was typical of the way they handle social relationships. This latter case suggests that paired interviewing may not be appropriate for some types of peer relationship. In most cases, it was relatively easy to distinguish between participants in the taped interview and to make out most of what was said, in contrast with larger focus groups. The typed transcripts therefore provide a relatively complete and highly accurate representation of how conversations developed in the course of the interviews. While these practical benefits are significant in themselves, it was in the context of the actual interviews that paired interviews really came into their own as a highly effective method of generating data with young people.

### **Social exchange within close friendship bonds**

In her study of peer group hierarchies, Michell noted that focus groups provide access to well-rehearsed 'public knowledge' and encourage types of social exchange that serve to reflect and reinforce such hierarchies (Michell, 1999). In encouraging some forms of social interaction over others, focus groups could then be said to be operating in similar ways to broader peer networks. The next part of the paper will attempt to shed light on how the close friendship bond present in paired interviews influences the types of accounts generated. Illustrative examples labelled with pseudonyms drawn from a broad cross-section of interview transcripts will be presented. In developing her analysis, the researcher draws on her experience and understanding of the whole interview rather than treating extracts of data in isolation from their broader context.



As with focus groups, the data provide rich descriptive accounts of many aspects of participants' day-to-day lives. However, one key feature which seems to differentiate paired interviews from focus groups is their potential for offering glimpses into more personal territory, in particular the private emotional worlds of young men. This is significant given that other studies have reported that neither focus groups nor one-on-one interviews have been able to access these kinds of account, particularly from low status young men (Michell, 1999)

In this first extract involving two boys who appeared to be members of an older peer group, a superficial reading may conclude that it is simply a comment about peer group norms. However, this account came right at the end of the interview and contrasted with earlier narratives favouring individual choice over other factors as an explanation for trying cannabis. The general demeanour of the participants also changed as the interview progressed, from bravado to more serious and measured engagement with the interview. Given these circumstances their later account can be read as an expression of vulnerability in relation to pressure from peers to try cannabis:

So why do you think most folk get into it [smoking cannabis], what is it that makes folk get started? [Interviewer]

Just like [Nathan, 13]

Just too common—people are daein'<sup>1</sup> it around you and you're expected tae dae it and you just dae [Neal, 14]

Like, people'll go, I'm no' daein' that, and then they'll just try it, eh, to see what its like. And then you'll be, like, smoking it another time [Nathan, 13]

Do folk ever try and force other folk to do it? [Interviewer]

Aye, you can try and say, nup, you say, naw, I've had too much, and they say, aye I've out-smoked you—and try and get you to take mair [Neal, 14]

This extract provides an interesting glimpse into how norms and practices operate in relation to cannabis in this particular peer group. However, more significantly, it also demonstrates how the burden of peer expectation can lead to a sense of resignation. This contrasts sharply with the more common tendency for young men to frame their explanations in ways that emphasize their personal autonomy.

The next extract involves two older lads who appeared confident and popular within their wider peer group. Again, at an early stage, the participants discussed their smoking and cannabis use in unproblematic ways. However, later in the interview, they described how they resort to excuses and strategies in order both to control their consumption of cigarettes and to manage peer group expectation:

So you were saying that you just have a social fag nowadays. Is that kind of quite easy to do given, you know, if other folk are smoking quite a lot around you [Interviewer]

It's a' right actually cause like I've got a sore throat so I can't smoke [laugh] [Barry, 15]

Is that a good excuse then? [Interviewer]

Aye [Barry, 15]

What about yourself? How often would you say you smoke now? [Interviewer]

Em about 10 a day maybe. If everyone else is smoking and I don't want one, I'll just like say, I've not got many left to do me the rest of the day and I'll just think I can't have one right now. So I'll just say I'm going up the road so I'll have one before I go up or try to make up excuses not to have them [Bruce, 15]

While these two examples fall short of revealing actual feelings, they do seem to reflect a process whereby the participants gradually feel safe and relaxed enough to let their guard down—both with the interviewer and with their fellow participant. When this happens, in some interviews at least, the stage is set for further details to be disclosed

which shed new light on the complexities of young people's social relationships and how they try to manage these.

The most vivid personal account of all, however, emerged not in a paired interview, but in a small group interview involving three young men. These participants specifically asked to be interviewed together, strongly suggesting a close friendship bond and shared history between them.

In this particular threesome, two of the participants described in quite harrowing, and yet, matter-of-fact terms how they had been violently bullied by a group of older lads, one in particular. As a result of their association with these older lads, all three, previously of good character, had begun themselves to get into trouble at school and at home. Alarm bells about possible bullying sounded earlier in the interview but references to these were censored by one of the participants and it was only at the very end of the interview that the account began to spill out.

Two participants described how they were forced to 'clean out' bongs<sup>2</sup> which had become clogged up, a process which caused very unpleasant physical effects. The extract presented demonstrates how the bullying took a more violent turn:

'Cause I was the biggest I used to get battered, like, every day [Barry, 13]

Me and Barry were having a joint each an' that and we were sitting there and he kent he couldnae handle bongs so he made him take a bong and Barry couldnae dae it, he didnae want any and he made him lie on the bed and put his hands against the wall and keep his legs straight and he started battering him and everything [Brad, 13]

And I'm like that, and I went nup, I'm no' daein' it, right, and he was like, total punched me [Barry, 13]

He punches him and goes, dae it [Brad, 13]

And I started kicking him and everything [Barry, 13]

And he went radge and that inside, made him kneel doon and started hitting him in the face and everything [Brad, 13]

The third participant in this threesome, a 15-year-old, was less vocal than the other two throughout the course of the interview, and seemed shy and withdrawn. He did not contribute at all to the accounts of bullying and seemed less willing than the other two to volunteer information that hinted at vulnerability. In common with the other two, however, he seemed to experience this friendship group as a safe context within which he could both give and receive support. This environment both supported his reserved demeanour and the more personal disclosures of his fellow participants, and did not hint at a 'pecking order' within this grouping. It seems likely that, as with the paired interviews, this close friendship bond played a key role in making the interview setting a 'safe' place to disclose information of a more personal nature. The fact that most participants chose the paired interview format suggests that this close bond may be played out more often among pairs of friends although the experience of this threesome demonstrates that a close friendship bond can also be present in small groups. In two out of three of these interviews, the more revealing accounts emerged in the context of the 'agree'/'disagree' card game introduced towards the end of the interview but in the absence of a systematic comparison, it is difficult to assess its impact on the types of data generated. It seems likely that a flexible approach to interviewing young people which respects their own choices about how they would like to be interviewed is a fruitful way forward. In this way, it may be possible to encourage a process whereby some young people at least may feel comfortable enough to discuss aspects of their lives that they might otherwise keep private. It is possible of course, that hierarchies may operate even in self-selected friendship pairs, where one participant's power over the other compromises their ability to exercise free choice and to speak freely (Michell, 1999). Such a dynamic is likely to encourage certain types of social interaction and

suppress others, but it also poses an ethical dilemma for the researcher who has a responsibility to safeguard the well-being of both participants. Sensitive selection of friendship pairs, requiring prior knowledge and experience of the context, would seem to be an appropriate way of managing this potential problem.

So far, this paper has argued that paired interviews, and small, self-selected groups, can play a useful role in accessing data generated within close friendship bonds and that this may encourage young people to develop their narratives beyond well-rehearsed 'public' accounts, making them distinctive from larger focus groups. The potential for paired interviews to access many other forms of social exchange between participants was also apparent in the author's study. The next part of the paper will explore two particular aspects of these interactions—their role in shedding light on what young people know and to some extent how they learn, and their role in illuminating differences between young people and how these are played out in the paired interview setting.

### **Young people's knowledge and how they learn**

The paired interview format allowed for frequent and sustained dialogue between participants, a process possible in larger groups but likely to be much more dispersed and fragmented. Insights into how young people draw upon and understand adult concepts like 'peer pressure', for example, emerged in many of the interviews. Here, the participants present a multi-factorial explanation for why young people use substances, clearly privileging the role of choice and social interaction with peers over adult oriented social inadequacy theories. They also move between talking hypothetically about other young people and discussing their own experience, a discursive practice that arose frequently in this study and is consistent with other studies which show that accounts of 'peer pressure' often do not distinguish between expectation and experience (Albutt *et al.*, 1995; Michell and West, 1996):

Why do you think young people get into drink like that? [Interviewer]

Well, I think you just think its fun, and sometimes it is [Britney, 13]

They just want to try something new, they think they just want to try something for the first time and they might think that was great, I'll do it again. And sometimes, it's mainly peer pressure 'cause like if you see all your friends doing it, you think, gosh, should I do it as well [Billie, 13]

Well, I don't really think it's peer pressure as such—they might ask us and if you say no, because you are able to say no, if you say no, then they're like fine, that's OK. 'Cause you ask them, oh, do you wish to start smoking and I go, oh, it's the worst thing I ever started, then, you know, it's like, don't—don't start it. And like drinking and everything they just do it just for fun, and they think of it as fun and the next day, its like, god, remember what happened last night and they're always like, Oh [Britney, 13]

Can't remember [laugh] [Billie, 13]

They can't remember, or I can't believe I did that and they're laughing and everything and it's just fun [Britney, 13]

The paired format also enabled some participants to meet the challenge of responding to questions outside their usual frame of understanding. Here, the participants, both non-smokers, begin to theorize about a practice which is completely novel to them, drawing on a range of explanatory frameworks:

Some young people who've never smoked cigarettes try cannabis and then end up smoking cigarettes on a regular basis. Have you heard of that before—some people start with cannabis? [Interviewer]

Em, I've never heard of it [Naomi, 15]

I think it's more likely to be the other way about—you need something stronger [Natasha, 15]

I don't see how they could get cannabis and they couldn't get cigarettes [Naomi, 15]

Maybe they just thought, oh aye, I'm hard enough to start with the strong stuff and then like, maybe take a step back and then start smoking instead 'cause they're still getting attention fae it and they feel cool [Natasha, 15]

Maybe they think that smoking's nothing—its no' going to harm you but it really does, you can get cancer an' a' that [Naomi, 15]

But you get people with cancer who haven't smoked, and they've done nothing for it and people have smoked and think, I'll no' get that. 'Cause my cousin had cancer, she was only seven and she died from it. And it's like, you ken all these people are smoking and they think it'll never happen to me. It just shows you—it can happen to anybody [Natasha, 15]

Clearly, this kind of process also occurs in adult focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994). However, the primacy of the best friend relationship at this stage in many young people's lives may mean that paired interviews are especially useful for encouraging this particular age group to interact with each other in this way.

### **Differences between young people—argumentative interactions**

So far, this analysis has concentrated on complementary interactive processes which have largely been about consensus and the articulation of shared norms and experiences, but paired interviews also offer the potential to highlight differences between individuals. Such interactions range from simple misunderstandings to violent disagreements and include instances of participants admonishing and censoring one another. Depending on the context, participants might respond by modifying or qualifying their position, by 'climbing down', by 'agreeing to disagree', by reaching a consensus position or by shifting their position in the light of new knowledge. In this first extract, the participants speculate about a hypothetical event of some relevance in their lives—how their parents might

react if they were brought home by the police. Their initial responses reveal vastly differing views but they both modify their position as the discussion develops, perhaps as a 'face-saving' manoeuvre aimed at strengthening the social bonds between them:

What would your folks make of that, if you got taken home by the police? [Interviewer]

My ma would murder me [Niamh, 13]

My ma wouldnae dae nothing [Nat, 14]

Naw, I dinnae think she would go radge, but [Niamh, 13]

I wouldnae get grounded or that, she'd just let me oot, just say watch what you're daein' [Nat, 14]

By comparison, other differences between participants sometimes took the form of direct challenges to the accuracy or truthfulness of a participant's account. In most cases these challenges took place in the context of an interview partner 'talking up' their substance use, a discursive practice which in itself says much about the role of substances in young people's lives. Sometimes, the challenge took a non-verbal form—usually a disparaging laugh. In this example, a verbal challenge is made and the young man in question immediately accepts the alternative version presented by his interview partner, adding weight to this other, more grounded account. This exchange also sheds light on one of the shared social processes that surround young people's smoking—the ritual of chipping in together to buy cigarettes:

How many would you say you smoke? [Interviewer]

Ten a day [Rob, 13]

Five, cos you go halfers on them [Raymond, 13]

Aye, we go halfers and we get five each [Rob, 13]

In some cases, participants went further, actually admonishing one another in the course of the interview. In the first example, involving the only



mixed sex pairing, the young woman in the pair seems critical of her male partner for making light of what she considers to be a serious matter. This exchange perhaps suggests a gender or an age difference in attitudes to the experience of getting ill from excessive use of cannabis:

Some folk say that sometimes its not that pleasant, actually, using hash—have you ever found that? [Interviewer]

Aye, when you take too much and you just want to be sick—you go completely green and you just cannae stop being sick [Rosemary, 15]

Brian and Billy doon at the beach [laugh] [Robert, 14]

That wisnae funny [Rosemary, 15]

The second example can be interpreted in a number of ways. It could be that one participant is simply expressing her impatience with her interview partner's seeming obsession with ecstasy. However, it can also be read as disapproval at what she sees as the inappropriate disclosure of sensitive information:

See drinking as well, would folk be drinking and smoking hash, or what? [Interviewer]

Aye, popping a few eccies (ecstasy) [Lee-Ann, 12]

Aw, shut up, Wendy [Tracey, 14]

Broader contextual factors seem to support the second interpretation. In contrast with other participants, these two young women expressed reservations about the interview being tape-recorded and were clearly nervous about being over-heard by others in the building. In fact, the interview was twice interrupted inadvertently by adults coming into the room, events which generated an angry response from one participant:

See the next time somebody walks in here, I'm going to punch them [Tracey, 14]

## Discussion

This paper has discussed the potential of paired interviewing to elicit young people's perspectives

on their smoking and cannabis use behaviour in the wider context of their social environments. It has argued that at a practical level, self-selected paired interviews offer a fresh approach to the difficult enterprise of accessing and accurately representing aspects of young people's lives. Inviting young people to pair up with a friend appears to facilitate access and recruitment, as well as helping to maximize the accuracy and completeness of transcribed interview data. This is in contrast to some of the difficulties reported with larger focus groups where interview recordings have proved impossible to transcribe because of young people talking at once, frequently interrupted one another and where individual speakers could not be identified (Michell and West, 1996). The format is clearly popular with young people themselves and is highly effective in engaging and maintaining their interest and motivation, one of the formidable challenges in young people's research (Gray *et al.*, 1997). In treating young people as active participants in the research process (Alderson, 1995), paired interviews also address many of the ethical challenges of conducting research with young people. Acknowledging and drawing upon young people's 'expert' status can address the power imbalance in the research relationship and encourage the generation of richer data, although care needs to be taken to ensure that power differentials are absent from the friendship pairs themselves. Peer relationships which are structured by a hierarchy or which have a competitive element to them may benefit from a different approach. A crucial starting point is meeting with young people on their own terms prior to the interview. This is fundamental to developing rapport and goes a long way towards minimizing unhelpful dynamics during the interview itself. Early discussion with key informants can also help to ensure that recruitment decisions about the formation of interview pairs or groupings are ethical and fair to all potential participants.

The central argument of the paper is that paired interviews represent a novel addition to qualitative interviewing techniques. In many respects, they complement focus groups in their potential for

accessing interactions between participants and for generating data which illuminate many aspects of young people's daily lives. Illustrative examples from interview transcripts have shown, for example, young people challenging adult discourses and trying to make sense of unfamiliar concepts. Data which highlight differences and how these are played out in the interview setting have also provided fascinating glimpses into how young people manage this aspect of their social relationships with one another. However, what makes paired interviews distinctive from larger focus groups is their potential for accessing accounts generated within close friendship bonds. This dynamic seems to encourage young people, especially young men, to take tentative steps into more personal territory, providing occasional glimpses into their private, emotional worlds. This dynamic is not unique to paired interviews—it can also be present in small, self-selected groups—a finding consistent with a recent key study on young people's smoking behaviour (Michell, 1996; Michell and West, 1997). Respecting young people's choices about how they would like to be interviewed would seem to be an appropriate methodological feature of any study which seeks to understand more about young people's health-relevant behaviours, so long as this choice is freely made by all the participants.

#### **Implications for health education/promotion research, policy and practice**

The popularity of paired interviewing with young people themselves and its potential for shedding new light on young people's perspectives on health-related issues make this method a promising addition in health research. The findings presented in this paper can only be considered exploratory, however, and further research is required to undertake a more systematic comparison of focus groups and paired interviews. Such a study could explore the extent to which self-selected paired interviews represent 'best friend' relationships in young people's social worlds while focus groups may operate in similar ways to broader peer networks in the forms of social exchange they encourage.

In this way, the subtleties of the different relationships and social interactions in young people's lives and how these influence the expression of views, beliefs and experience can be explored. Paired interviews, in common with focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994), also have great potential in generating concepts far more useful to health education/promotion policy and practice than more deductive approaches. Insights into how young people challenge adult discourses on concepts like 'peer pressure', for example, can help practitioners to develop new approaches with young people which move beyond 'adultist' assumptions. Understanding more about the theories and concepts that young people draw upon to make sense of their smoking and cannabis use behaviour can also help to make initiatives more salient in young people's lives. It becomes clear, for example, that there is no single young person's perspective on smoking and cannabis use—these activities have socio-cultural meanings particular to different youth cultures and sub-cultures (Albutt *et al.*, 1995; Bell *et al.*, 1998; Pavis and Cunningham-Burley, 1999). Health education/promotion initiatives aimed at addressing young people's substance use can usefully take account of such insights by finding ways of contextualizing smoking and cannabis use within young people's social and cultural worlds. A more insightful understanding of young people's social relationships with one another, e.g. how they manage difference, is also valuable and could perhaps lead to the development of more interactive forms of health education/promotion which draw on this sort of dynamic. Paired interviews, then, offer a novel context within which young people can discuss, debate and theorize about aspects of their social worlds, offering occasional glimpses into more private territory. By harnessing this knowledge and working as equal partners, health education/promotion can more effectively address some of the challenges facing young people today.

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### Notes

1. The interviews were conducted in Scotland with young Scottish people and have been transcribed verbatim using the language and expressions used by the participants. The quotes presented in the text of this paper therefore include many examples of Scottish vernacular.
2. Bongs are a method of using cannabis, common in some youth sub-cultures, and capable of producing more potent effects than joints rolled with tobacco.

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